Victor Burgin's *Parzival* in Leuven

Reflections on the "Uncinematic"

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> "So let them come, the gay incendiaries with charred fingers! Here they are! Here they are!… Come on! set fire to the library shelves!"
>
> F.T. Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," first published in *Le Figaro* of Paris on February 20, 1909.[1]

Flawed Temporality

"For eternities I've waited for you. My Saviour, who comes so late!"

These are the words that make up one of the textual interventions in Victor Burgin's *Parzival* (2013). Since the work is meant to be installed as an ongoing loop and the viewing experience therefore depends on the instant of entering the gallery, it would be pointless to specify whether the viewers come early or late to the screening. It would be equally meaningless to call the moment of their appearing a 'prominent' or 'climactic' one, since all of *Parzival*'s audiovisual components belong to a circular flow that dispenses with the laws of a linear or plot-driven narrative.

This phrase, in other words, is as good an entry into *Parzival* as any other first encounter with the installation. It is taken from the second act of Richard Wagner's last completed opera (1882) which, short of two letters, shares its title with Burgin's piece. While *Parzival* refers to elements and themes that are present in Wagner's *Parsifal*, it is important to stress at the outset that *Parzival* is not a work *about* the opera. Therefore, rather than fixing the meaning of the former by referring to possible similarities with the latter, we would like to open up a novel web of conceptual affinities through a critical dialogue that does not just involve the two works, but a variety of other works as well. Some of these works have been explicitly named as a source of inspiration, while others have not been mentioned in Victor Burgin's "Note on *Parzival*" nor in the eight wall texts that the artist composed to accompany the work's installments.[2]

Though the above-quoted sentence is derived from a famous scene in Wagner's *Parsifal*, it is worthwhile to reiterate a brief summary of its context. Parsifal, the "pure fool" (*reine Tor*) who does not even remember his own name, has been endowed with the task to retrieve the Holy Spear and thus restore unity to the community of Grail Knights. He has managed to enter into the magical garden of Klingsor, once a fellow Knight but now turned against them. Surrounded by a group of seductive Flower maidens (*Blumenmädchen*), Parsifal resists their charms but is approached by the dazzlingly beautiful Kundry, who is the first person to call him by his real name and to inform him about his past. Afflicted by an age-old curse to roam around restlessly and without sleep, Kundry begs Parsifal to relieve her, telling him how much she has longed for his arrival. Instead, Parsifal, suddenly overcome by a painful awareness of the importance of his task to retrieve the Holy Spear, rejects Kundry's advances.

The reference to Kundry's anguish is thus explicitly included in Victor Burgin's *Parzival*, and within this projection work it indicates an important theme, which we want to identify in terms of a 'flawed temporality.' With this we refer to a moment of 'belatedness' and to the experience that something highly anticipated is either not taking place at all, or not taking place at the right moment. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe the structure of such a moment of belatedness. Their analysis revolves around an experience of slowness that cannot, in fact, be disconnected from an intense speed. They mention the following example:

> A girl is late on account of her speed: she did too many things, crossed too many spaces in relation to the relative time of the person waiting for her. Thus her apparent slowness is transformed into the breakneck speed of our waiting (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980/1987: 271).

In the view of Deleuze and Guattari, it is Marcel Proust who has understood such an experience of flawed temporality or belatedness particularly well. Deleuze and Guattari write that

> Proust […] has shown us once and for all that [the] individuation [of a girl, a group of girls], collective or singular, proceeds not by subjectivity but by haecceity, pure haecceity. 'Fugitive beings.' They are pure relations of speeds and slownesses, and nothing else (271).

While Deleuze and Guattari neither give us more information nor add a reference to Proust's original text, it is clear that this 'individuation

of a girl, a group of girls' stems from a classic scene in the second volume of Proust's monumental *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927): that is, to the scene about "the little band" (*la petite bande*) in the book *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower* (1919). The Narrator, who is walking along the seafront in the town of Balbec in Normandy, spots a 'little band' of girls and, losing interest in everything else, falls madly in love with all of them at once.

It is only later that the Narrator will single out one girl from the group, Albertine Simonet, to whom he loses his heart entirely. This scene in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* sets up a first moment in the conceptual and critical dialogue through which we would like to approach Victor Burgin's *Parzival.* Numerous commentators have pointed out the affinities between Proust's *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower* and Wagner's *Blumenmädchen* and have documented Proust's interest in *Parsifal*.[3] *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower* is a description of the Narrator's sexual awakening and the book is filled with lyrical comparisons of girls to flowers. Proust's description of the seductive powers of the 'little band,' hence, is clearly an echo of the beginning of the second act in Wagner's opera. Because this scene in *In Search of Lost Time* shows us something important about the flawed temporality and the experience of belatedness that interests us in Burgin's *Parzival*, it is worthwhile quoting it extensively:

> And even if I were fated, now that I was ill and did not go out by myself, never to be able to make love to them, I was happy all the same, like a child born in a prison or a hospital, who, having always supposed that the human organism was capable of digesting only dry bread and 'physic,' has learned suddenly that peaches, apricots and grapes are not simply part of the decoration of the country scene but delicious and easily assimilated food. Even if his gaoler or his nurse does not allow him to pluck those tempting fruits, still the world seems to him a better place and existence in it more clement. For a desire seems to us more attractive, we repose on it with more confidence, when we know that outside ourselves there is a reality which conforms to it, even if, for us, it is not to be realised. And we think with more joy of a life in which (on condition that we eliminate for a moment from our mind the tiny obstacle, accidental and special, which prevents us personally from doing so) we can imagine ourself to be assuaging that desire. As to the pretty girls who went past, from the day on which I had first known that their cheeks could be kissed, I had become curious about their souls. And the universe had appeared to me more interesting (Proust, 1919/2006: 648).

In this passage, Proust describes how a moment that *thwarts* the satisfaction of a desire can nevertheless result in an intense experience and a heightened awareness of one's surroundings. While the Narrator is confronted with the necessity to postpone the fulfillment of his longing, it is this experience of flawed temporality and belatedness itself which re-opens the world in an entirely novel manner ('The universe had appeared to me more interesting'). The happiness that is here likened to an escape from a prison or hospital is thus intimately related to the capacity to *postpone* the moment of satisfying one's desire. In this manner, Proust hits upon a type of happiness that is truly 'beyond the pleasure principle.' He describes genuine happiness as a capacity of human desire to 'preserve' itself and this, so to speak, by *eluding* the moment of satisfaction.

Figure 1

Victor Burgin, Still from *Parzival*, 2013 [Frame enlargement of Edmund Meschke (as Edmund Köhler) from Roberto Rossellini, *Germany Year Zero*, 1948].

Rather than as a moment of the fulfillment of desire, satisfaction is here understood as a moment of suspension: it is satisfaction itself which needs to be delayed since it will 'spoil' the productivity and ongoing dynamic of human longing. The experience of flawed temporality or belatedness, hence, is here a sign of a sustained and dynamic relation with the outside world. That something does not happen, in other words, should not automatically be taken to mean that nothing happens. While the world is experienced as not giving us what we really want, this very experience can at times be enlivening and intensifying since it might just as well allow us to feel with renewed energy that something was longed for in the first place.

We agree with Deleuze and Guattari's suggestion that such experiences of delay and postponement are intimately related with what they have called "haecceities (1980/1987: 261)." With this concept, Deleuze and Guattari make use of Greek and Medieval philosophy to indicate the 'thisness' and irreplaceable 'singularity' of a given phenomenon. A haecceity, as a consequence, does not refer to a set of qualities or characteristics that can be shared with other phenomena but it marks a series of unique "relations (261)" between various elements that might seem wholly different from each other when perceived in isolation. Haecceities, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari denote "capacities to affect and be affected" and are inseparable from "assemblages" and "potentialities of becoming (261)" or from "degrees, intensities, events and accidents (253)."

Figure 2

Victor Burgin, Still from *Parzival*, 2013.

Figure 3

Victor Burgin, Still from *Parzival*, 2013.

Victor Burgin's *Parzival* consists of returning images that can indeed be considered as haecceities. The most important ones are the images of a young boy (discussed hereafter) (fig. 1), the images of nature (trees and water) (figs. 2 and 3) and the images of ruins (figs. 4 and 5). These images become haecceities through their mutual capacity to overwrite each other's meaning with an intensified chain of associations. Because they return multiple times and because the installation as a whole is

Figure 4

Victor Burgin, Still from *Parzival*, 2013.

Figure 5

Victor Burgin, Still from *Parzival*, 2013.

screened as a loop, these images interpenetrate and operate on each other, thereby re-opening ever novel layers of meaning. Their meaning is thus never fixed or fully determined and none of the images can shake off a sense of belatedness: in an important manner, these images always slightly 'miss' their moment of becoming fully legible. They are thereby marked by a flawed or impure and heterogeneous temporality.

Rather than resulting in images that are under-determined, this belatedness or flawed temporality triggers an effect of over-determination: they set up a fundamental openness and a lived interaction with the viewer whose endeavor to make sense of the installation cannot be completed. Such 'capacities to affect and be affected' on the part of the images included in *Parzival* are hard to achieve by means of the classical montage that is used in narrative cinema. Obviously, the different images that are put together through classical montage also have a mutual effect on each other but montage here most often serves as a means to stabilize a network of ideas. In *Parzival*, to the contrary, images are not allowed to, as Sergei Eisenstein famously put it, "*acquir*[*e*] [a] specific meaning [our emphasis]" since they, rather, do not cease to *give* meaning and this in ever changing ways (Eisenstein, 1929/1998: 112). *Parzival*, namely, has replaced the development of a plot with the repetition of a series of images that interrupts the narrative progress. Likewise, the aims of concluding a story or illustrating an idea have here been replaced with the effect of an unresolved differentiation and change.

Associative Assemblage

In conversation, Victor Burgin has pointed out how his most recent works, which make use of sophisticated software technology, should always be referred to as "projection work."[4] This is a clear statement, by which Burgin wants to draw a line between his most recent, digitally composed works and what has been identified in the discourse on art of the past decades as 'video,' 'film,' or 'cinema.' Both in writing and while lecturing on his oeuvre, Burgin has emphasized the "*uncinematic* feel" of his projection works—a term he systematically uses since a few years now in order to distinguish his practice from "*video*" art with a "*cinematic feel* [emphasis in original](Burgin, 2008: 90)."[5] The difference, he specifies, consists in the fact that all components comprising his works should be "equally weighted" and "autonomously significant."[6] "All elements," he writes, "equally are potential points of departure for chains of association." In this way, the artist feels he is able to construct important analogies with a "psychoanalytic session," exercises which have always been of key inspiration to his oeuvre, as they stimulate mechanisms such as "*deferred action*," the "*déja vu*" and the "*uncanny* [emphasis in original]."

Thus develops an 'uncinematic' artistic approach, which both builds on and elaborates further what Burgin has previously identified—in an essay of 1987 entitled "Geometry and Abjection"—as his "*psychical realism*—impossible, but nevertheless… [emphasis in original](Burgin,

1987/2009: 197)." To Alexander Streitberger's question as to why he added this important caveat, Victor Burgin answered the following:

> My parenthetical remark is a wry comment on my ambitions for my own work: I know very well that I can never adequately represent a fleeting moment of perception in its full complexity — optical, cognitive, judgmental, affective, and so on — but nevertheless feel compelled to try (Streitberger, 2009: 110).

In the most recent projection works, Victor Burgin has decisively turned this 'incapacity' or 'inadequacy' to 'represent a fleeting moment' into a productive creative force. In an interview conversation with David Campany, he describes how, after having "'built' the work," he "walk[s] away from it and leave[s] it to others to inhabit as they will (Burgin and Campany, 2014: 146)." He now conceives of 'accessibility' in relation to his projection works in terms of the visitor being "*free* [emphasis in original](146)" to enter the work as she pleases. Of course, each projection work's "foundations" are solid and "firm (146)," since he has been so thorough on both a historical and theoretical level. But, as he lucidly explains, that does not imply at all that he expects the visitor to "understand (146)" each and every aspect of the underlying foundations of his works:

> As a working-class child, with nothing of 'high culture' at home, I had access to well-stocked free public libraries. The city I lived in had an art museum, admission was free and I went there often. I can't say I 'understood' everything I saw in the city art gallery, or read in the books I borrowed from the library, but worlds beyond the confines of my everyday life — not least, worlds of my own imagining — were *accessible* to me. No one patronised me, no one condescended to provide me with books or paintings they thought I would 'understand' — after all, what does 'understand' mean if not a perfect match between the message emitted and the message received? This kind of understanding is for traffic signs, not art (146) [emphasis in original].

As a result, Burgin feels that he has achieved the methodological freedom to let go of the need to construct a story at all:

> Unlike the films we see at the cinema, it is not the purpose of my videos to tell a tale; rather, the narrative in my videos is simply one association to the real amongst others, just as are the fragments of music I may use, and just as are the other images — which may

include images from films — that enter the image-track of my videos.[7]

Within *Parzival*, the tension mostly builds up via a delicate balancing out of sound and silence, and of image or absence of an image (meaning relatively long moments of only showing a black screen). Depending on when one enters the work, one will encounter two minutes of music from Wagner's *Parsifal* before one first sees a silently-held image of a young boy. After that follows a silent virtual tour through a ruined landscape before the music starts again while underwater shots are being displayed (fig. 6). Finally, one hears Kundry sing for an extended moment in complete darkness right after the appearance of a young woman giving the boy a loving, motherly kiss (while his body language appears to suggest he is rather receiving it as a betrayal) (fig. 7). Afterwards, a textual sequence appears on screen in which Kundry speaks to Parsifal as in the medieval saga (fig. 8). Only after this does a visual reference to Wagner come in, in the form of a scale model of a Venetian Palazzo (fig. 9).

Let us now deepen our reading of some of the just described images and text fragments included in *Parzival*, in order to understand in

Figure 6

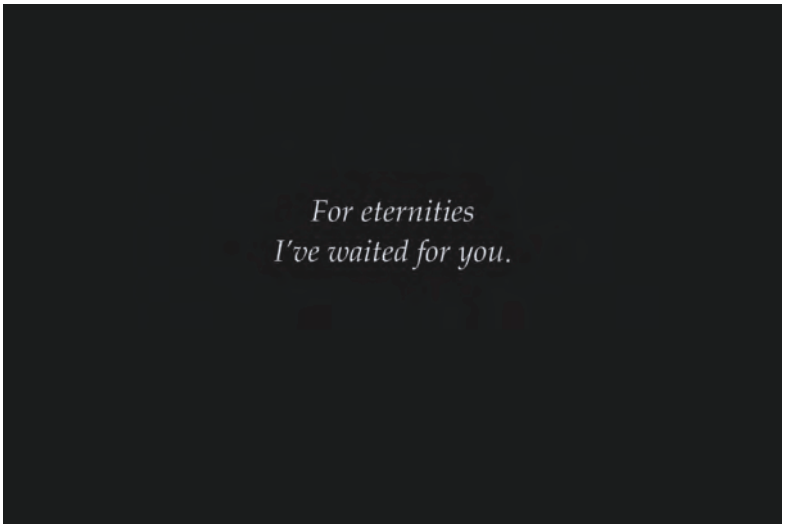
Victor Burgin, Still from *Parzival*, 2013.

a more precise manner why such an approach allows for haecceities to emerge, which can affect both us and each other. On a first level of interpretation, the images of a young boy/a young woman, of landscape/nature and of ruins/architectural models indicate three distinct temporalities: while youthfulness denotes the hopeful intensity of what is 'yet to be' and nature indicates the spontaneous givenness of what simply 'is,' ruins, for their part, embody the melancholic awareness of what 'has already been.' On account of the mutual interconnections between the various images, however, these distinct temporalities are blurred and made impure in a fundamental manner.

Figure 7

Victor Burgin, Still from *Parzival*, 2013 [Frame enlargement of Edmund Meschke (as Edmund Köhler) and Ingetraud Hintze (as Eva Köhler) from Roberto Rossellini, *Germany Year Zero*, 1948].

The image of the young boy, which keeps returning in various instances of *Parzival*, offers a rich illustration of what we have called flawed temporalities and of irreducible heterogeneity. Victor Burgin has borrowed the still from Roberto Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* (1948). This influential film about life in Germany in the immediate aftermath of World War II, confronts its viewers both with buildings in ruins and with people trying to reconstruct their lives in and on those ruins—one may bear in mind that Rossellini's film starts out in complete silence with a lengthy travelling shot through Berlin's ruined streets. Perhaps what is most striking about this film is that it also provides insight into how the people themselves have turned into wrecks—into 'ruins.' The principal character, a twelve-year-old boy named Edmund, grows up amidst this devastated cityscape of an almost completely bombed Berlin. The film portrays Edmund's struggle for existence and is set up around a series of injustices and misfortunes.



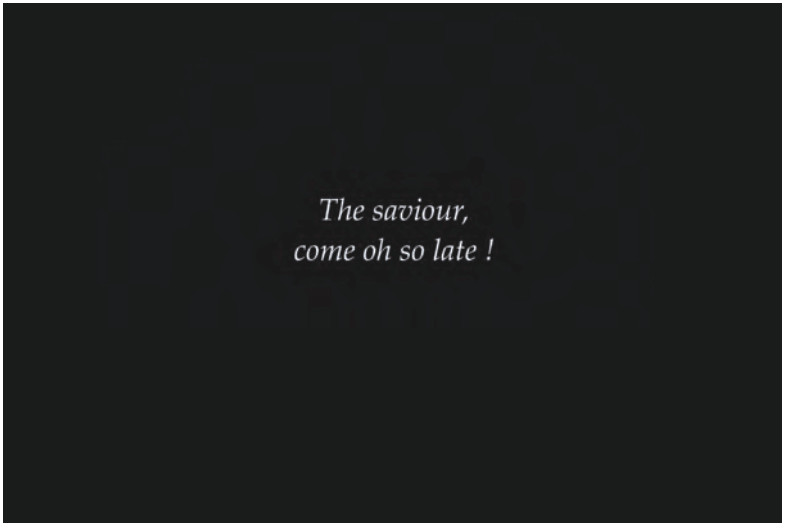


Figure 8

Victor Burgin, Intertitles from *Parzival*, 2013.

The film is set in the absence of a mother figure, who is replaced by Edmund's sister Eva, with whom he entertains an Oedipal relationship.

The already-mentioned, most prominent still integrated from this film within *Parzival* depicts Edmund observing, from the opposite side of the street, the coffin of his father's corpse (whom he has poisoned) being taken out of the house while his two older siblings, Eva and Karl-Heinz, arrive home. The moral of the scene is clear: given that they no longer need to take care of their sick father, his young adult brother (an ex-soldier living until then in hiding but now just released by the police) and his sister (who had been seeing dubious men in the evenings

in order to make herself a living) now have a future ahead of them. Heavily indoctrinated by the vicious advice (and the likely pedophilic aggressions) of a former teacher he has been secretly seeing for a while, Edmund is persuaded of the contrary, given the patricide he committed in an attempt to liberate himself from the guilt he imagines to be his part (for having been a 'naughty' child). The final scene of *Germany Year Zero* confronts us with a thoroughly meaningless ending: Edmund jumps from a ruined building to his death.

Figure 9

Victor Burgin, Still from *Parzival*, 2013.

Parzival shows us nothing more than Edmund contemplating his jump, not the actual jumping—it only displays the moment right before the 'decisive moment.' That very shot even returns on four different occasions within *Parzival*'s sequential development, always in slightly different durations. This "*ritornello*" motif, as Burgin identifies it in his essays on the concept of the 'uncinematic,' turns out to be a hallmark structuring element of his projection works.[8] Upon watching Edmund's portrait several times over and over again, one becomes aware of the various options the boy has been potentially pondering, and thus of the different futures Edmund could have had, but which are now forever closed off to him.

At the same time *Parzival* detaches the image of the young Edmund from its original context of the Rossellini film and reintegrates it within the constellation of a projection work in which it is, appropriately, succeeded by a sequence of images of ruins. Abstracted from its original identification as Edmund, the image of 'just a young boy' thus becomes

a haecceity. This happens thanks to its capacity of bringing together two very different, even opposing elements: the innocence and hopefulness of youth are here conjoined with the despair and forlornness that mark the ruin. The internal tensions of a haecceity cannot be resolved. Burgin's *Parzival* is therefore constructed around images that resonate an ultimate undecidability: they simultaneously trigger an experience of hope *and* deflate high-minded ideals about redemption and reconciliation.

This becomes most clear when one does not only connect the images of the young boy with the images of ruins, but with another sentence that is included in *Parzival*. It reads: "It is because of the child that we attach ourselves to the world, take part in its turmoil, take its incurable stupidity seriously." Through the association with this sentence, which is borrowed from Milan Kundera's novel *Identity* (1997), the images of the young boy are, once again, charged with a dynamic of hopefulness. In Kundera's novel the protagonist, Chantal, has divorced from her husband after the death of their five-year-old son. This loss results in an inability to meaningfully engage with other people and the outside world or, as Chantal herself sees it, in a more authentic experience of the cynical and bitter truth behind the world's appearances. This theme of innocence and youth is counterbalanced in the novel by the theme of 'stupidity,' mentioned in Burgin's above-quoted text fragment as well. In both Kundera's novel and Burgin's installation, stupidity is associated with the commonly supposed power of nature to spontaneously and continuously regenerate itself.

In Kundera's story, Chantal is pressured by her family to have another child. Chantal opposes and reacts very vehemently against this appeal to nature's supposed ability to undo human suffering and loss, as if the death of her first child could simply be annulled by a new birth and the facile repetition of a physical process. Moreover, one of the characters in *Identity* describes the cycle of natural regeneration in a cold and ironic manner so as to empty it of all ideals of spontaneous restoration and renewal:

> The essential, in life, is to perpetuate life: it is childbirth, and what precedes it, coitus, and what precedes coitus, seduction, that is to say kisses, hair floating in the wind, silk underwear, well-cut brassieres, and everything else that makes people ready for coitus, for instance good food—not fine cuisine, a superfluous thing no one appreciates any more, but the food everyone buys—and along with food, defecation, because you know, my dear lady, my beautiful adored lady, you know what a huge position the praise of toilet paper and nappies occupies in our

> profession. Toilet paper, nappies, detergents, food. That is man's sacred circle (Kundera, 1997/1998: 43).

While *Parzival* contains gorgeous images of a splendid nature audibly accompanied with the lyrical overture of Wagner's opera, it is clear that these images, likewise, trigger associations that run wholly counter to the romantic and idealized view of nature's supposed capacities for perpetual renewal and rejuvenation. The images of trees and water in *Parzival*, that is to say, are clearly digitalized and retain an artificial immobility.

Like the 'assemblage' that resulted from the images of the young boy with the images of ruins, the heterogeneous connections between the images of the young boy, the quotation from Kundera, and the images of nature result in a haecceity with a split structure, thus hinting at the ultimate inseparability of hope and anguish. On the one hand, the images of the young boy trigger an enlivening and intensifying experience. They release the hope of redemption from the idealized arrival of a much longed-for Savior and, instead, associate it with the natural innocence of a child. Deflating the ideal of a Redeemer that is always 'still to come,' the images of the young boy instead discover hope in the natural presence of something that is always 'already there:' youth and childhood.

Thus, the junction of the repetitive visual trope of the young boy and the novel's text fragment convey that the fundamental, human capacity to relate to *this* world and, as Kundera puts it, 'attach ourselves' to it, matters infinitely more than the longing for an entirely new and different universe coming from elsewhere. It is at this point that *Parzival* becomes most Proustian: casting the innocence of youth as an irreducible and natural presence of hope, the images of the young boy trigger the experience that, in spite of the inability to satisfy all of our desires, our immediate surroundings do nevertheless 'conform to [them].' On the other hand, however, it is clear that these same images of natural innocence and hope, surrounded as they are by references to and images of an ugly, 'stupid,' anonymous and indifferent nature, are incapable of carrying these lofty associations and hopeful qualities.

A Ruined Library

In his seminal contribution to this book, "Victor Burgin's *Parzival*: A Monument of Melancholia," Alexander Streitberger carefully contextualizes the importance of ruins in *Parzival* and in Burgin's overall oeuvre.[9] Given the importance of the images of ruins for our own selection of *Parzival* for a solo-exhibition in Leuven, we will briefly address the same theme, approaching it from a complementary perspective. One of the most important *topoi* in romantic art, the ruin traditionally refers to the belief in a fundamental form of continuity and persistence. The ruin, that is to say, is believed to grant the past an embodied survival and to allow it to acquire a presence that is ongoing and uninterrupted. The ruin, as a consequence, becomes material proof for the possibility of a dialogue across different generations and a unity between the past, the present and the future. In the ruin, something is allowed to age and grow older.

It is obviously this belief in continuity and persistence that turns the ruin into a quintessential Wagnerian trope, fully at home within an aesthetics that seeks to suspend as much as possible all references to a specific moment in time. While not addressing the topic of the ruin specifically, Theodor Adorno's book *In Search of Wagner* (1952) contains a profound analysis of such a suspension and of the importance of phantasmagoria for an understanding of Wagner's operas, including *Parsifal*. In his view, Wagner's aesthetics is made visible as an endeavor to overcome the limits of a given political and social situation by way of an affinity with 'mythic' powers. Adorno writes that, in *Parsifal*, "[t]he characters cast off their empirical being in time" and enter into "the ethereal kingdom of essences (Adorno, 1952/2008: 77)." For this reason, they "function as universal symbols" and "dissolve in the phantasmagoria like mist (78)."

"The world of chivalry in *Tristan* and *Parsifal*," he continues, "provides only the emotional coloring of a reality that has receded into the mists of time (104)." Adorno emphasizes how this jump into the absolute prepares the path for a dangerous type of ideology, that is, the type of ideology that *denies* its being an ideology to begin with. Such an ideology contains, at most, the "*traces* of a political awareness [our emphasis](106)." While the *topos* of the ruin, together with other elements of myth and phantasmagoria belong fully to the heart of nineteenth century imagination, it has survived well into the twentieth century. The same appeal to continuity and restoration underlies, for instance, the presence of ruins in the paintings and sculpture of an artist like Anselm Kiefer.

In an important part of his oeuvre, Kiefer draws on the power of ruins to bear witness to the violence and atrocities committed during

Figure 10

Leuven, Library in the historical 18th-century University Hall. Courtesy of the University of Leuven Archives.

World War II in Germany, and Europe in general. In these paintings, the ruin's material presence and continuity serve as counter-forces to the historical interruptions and *dis*continuities of the war: the ruins in these works seek out the redemptive power of something that has nevertheless managed to 'age' and grow older, in spite of the intense level of destruction and suffering during the war. Moreover, by overwriting the ruins in his paintings with the names of important German authors and artists, Kiefer's works suggest that this artistic and cultural heritage can, likewise, survive its dark history, thereby being saved from its mistreatment and exploitation in fascist ideology and Nazi propaganda.

This is not the place to expand on the reasons why this recent use of the *topos* of the ruin is problematic. We will therefore only mention the two reasons that are relevant for our discussion of *Parzival*. A reference to the ultimate *in*destructibility of ruins and to the sustained value of cultural heritage is wholly unsuited for the aim of commemorating what *has* been destroyed and did *not* survive. Secondly, fascist ideology and Nazi propaganda have, themselves, made ample use of the *topos* of the ruin to conjure a semblance of the absolute. Nazi architect Albert Speer's famous theory of "Ruin value (Speer, 1970/1997: 56)," for instance, can serve as the best example for the fascist ambition to construct buildings that supposedly acquire an 'eternal' presence. The mere fact that they belong to the heart of fascist rhetoric renders suspect the reference to the redemptive quality of ruins in works that deal explicitly with the German past.

This leads our discussion to Leuven. After its initial inauguration at the Wagner Geneva Festival one year earlier, for which it was produced, Victor Burgin's *Parzival* was exhibited at the University Library in Leuven from October 22 until January 11, 2014. The presentation was guest curated by the two of us. It formed the culminating moment of a collaborative project initiated by KU Leuven's Commission for Contemporary Art, in partnership with the Lieven Gevaert Research Centre for Photography, Art and Visual Culture, and with the Institute of Philosophy. While showing *Parzival* in the Library's ground floor exhibition room (*Expozaal*), the university sought to commemorate infamous events of World War I by making a relevant connection to a contemporary work of art.

Figure 11

Leuven, The University Library Building as inaugurated on 4 July 1928. Courtesy of the University of Leuven Archives.

The Library, situated in the heart of Leuven's historical center, is an important *lieu de mémoire* (fig. 11). It was inaugurated in July 1928, after having been constructed with the help of substantial American funding, thanks to the relentless efforts of the then still-to-become US President, Herbert Hoover. The new building served to replace the original Library situated within the University Hall, which had been destroyed by German soldiers during the so-called *Sack of Louvain*, a firestorm that had lasted for several days (fig. 10). It started on the evening of August 25, 1914 with the deliberate arson of the 18th-century

Figure 12

Leuven University Library ruins in the aftermath of the 'Sack of Louvain.' Courtesy of the University of Leuven Archives.

building, which contained the collection of a, by then, almost 500 year old university. 300,000 book volumes and precious manuscripts were burnt overnight (fig. 12).[10] The new Library building, designed for a different but nearby location by the US architect Whitney Warren (1864-1943), underwent serious damage once more on May 16, 1940. Taken under fire by German artillery shells, the book storage depository — which by then was filled with one million volumes thanks to substantial donations from various countries over the previous two decades — was burnt once again and most items/materials were lost.

An important reason why we wanted to see Victor Burgin's *Parzival* installed in this building and within the context of a project commemorating events that had happened 100 years before, was the reflective dimension that emerged with regard to the University Library building itself. The idea to recompose and reconstruct the Leuven University library collection had arisen in Paris intellectual circles as soon as the Great War came to an end. Support was given by influential voices such as Henri Bergson, who identified the fire as "the great attempt against thought [which] provoked a brilliant manifestation of solidarity between thinking men."[11] However, though Paris was in possession of much "symbolic capital (Derez, 2014: 699)," it became rapidly obvious that the necessary funding was to come from overseas — the USA.

As a result, the new Library was built on by far "the most royal building lot available, which the city's municipality only reluctantly granted, under high pressure (702)." This building can now be considered as one of the earliest landmarks on Belgian soil of US propaganda

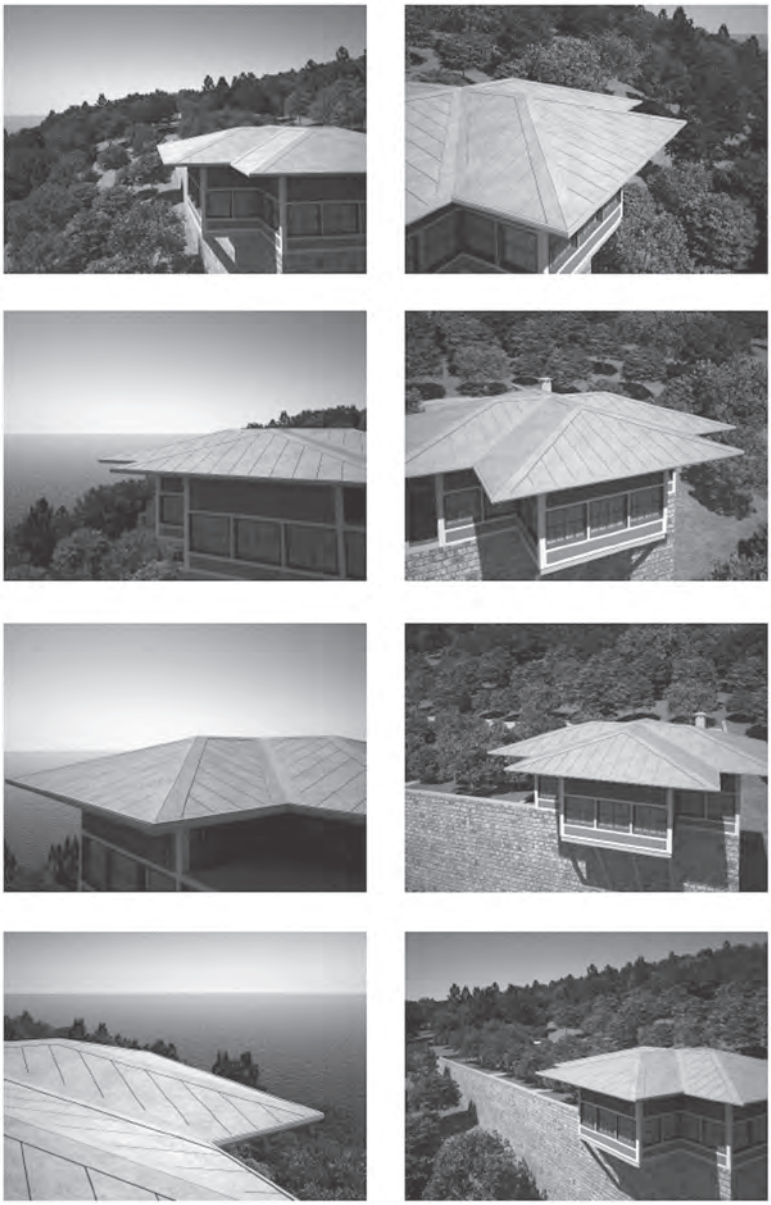


Figure 13

Victor Burgin,
A Place to Read, 2010.

by means of architecture. Had it depended on the American committee in charge of acquiring the necessary funding for Leuven, the ruined site of the historical University Hall itself would have been minimally consolidated as a commemorative place for future visitors. The local municipality, however, esteemed that this would not allow the wounds

to properly heal, and the Hall was rebuilt on its original site without, this time, reintegrating the library.

In the already-mentioned interview, David Campany emphasizes how architecture has been a "persistent and recurring object of attention in [Victor Burgin's] work (Burgin and Campany, 2014: 157)." Though he confirms this fascination with the medium from early on in his oeuvre, Burgin specifies at the same time that his interest in architecture has evolved over the years. Whereas earlier on his focus was rather on the building as a "socially useful object (157)," the artist's research now has shifted towards a much more critical attitude. Recent projection works such as *A Place to Read* (2010) (fig. 13), which contemplates the demolition of "an architecturally significant coffee house and public garden, on a beautiful site overlooking the Bosphorus, to make way for a hideous orientalist luxury hotel (147)," are emblematic examples of that newer approach.[12] On the less readily identifiable, more abstracted level of the ruin-raising-into-Palazzo or the Palazzo-falling-into-ruin (actually depending on when you start your viewing process of *Parzival*), *Parzival* also contains a similarly critical attitude with regard to hegemonic world views embodied in architectural constructions.

As curators, we were struck by the complexity of the created analogy with regard to what had actually happened in Leuven (the Phoenix rising from its ashes) and the levels on which the analogy worked compared to those levels where it obviously did not. As it turns out, Whitney Warren had a doubtful reputation as a "reactionary" architect from New York, who had previously built the imperium of his company Warren & Wetmore on the construction of luxury hotels and, not least, Grand Central Station (Derez, 2014: 699). There is no doubt that he was a "starchitect" avant-la-lettre.[13] The monumental building, much too big for the intimate scale of the historical city center with its bell tower overlooking the skyline of Leuven, gives the impression of being a replica of Flemish or Dutch Neo-Renaissance architecture. Mark Derez appropriately describes the building in terms of its being "anchored as a war ship (2014: 703)."[14] Its exterior façade is decorated with ornamental motifs that symbolize allied victory and Transatlantic solidarity. Furthermore, it is also completely covered with integrated building blocks in stone, identifying all the patrons (mostly universities and colleges) that donated the necessary funds for its construction (fig. 14).

Warren's personal ambition had reached even further than this already very pompous and imperialistic architectural program. Had it depended on him, the Leuven Library would have displayed an accusatory warning inscription on the balustrade of its frontal façade, containing the following words: "FURORE TEUTONICO DIRUTA,

DONO AMERICANO RESTITUTA [destroyed by Teutonic fury, restored by American gift](Derez, 2014: 705)." By 1928 however—given that the German authorities were conscientiously fulfilling all the obligations instigated upon them by the Versailles Treaty via punctual provisions of the required funding to re-fill the Leuven Library with the necessary books—the then rector of the University, Monseigneur Paulin Ladeuze, did not consider it appropriate to integrate the infamous inscription, as it would only have come to hamper the fragile resumption of a normal relationship with the neighboring country.

The question raised substantial controversy: Warren himself wanted the inscription at all costs, and he found support within the local community of citizens who continued to be scandalized by the fact that both the German Foreign Ministry and a committee of inquiry installed by the Reichstag had concluded that the blame for the set-fire was to be put on Belgian snipers. The Belgian snipers had, according to this version, provoked the German soldiers, who found themselves trapped in an ambush. It was told that the Germans created their escape route by causing an enormously invasive cloud of smoke. The 'balcony' case was brought before the Belgian courts which, in 1932, ruled in favor of Ladeuze. Nonetheless, that did not prevent the neutral balustrade from having become the subject of violent attacks, both in deeds and in words, for more years to come, culminating in the second aggression on the Leuven Library at the outset of World War II. No doubt the heated animosity around its rebuilding contributed to the fact that Leuven did not receive a similar amount of support when it

Figure 14

Names of University patrons engraved in stone on the façade of the 1928 University Library Building, Leuven. Courtesy of the University of Leuven Archives.

had to reconstruct its Library for the second time, in the aftermath of the final liberation of Belgium in 1945.

In coming to terms with this complicated history, it is worth bringing to mind the following lines, expressed by Victor Burgin to David Campany:

> A historical event is a complex of fragmentary and often contradictory representations — archival, fictional, psychical, and so on. Hollywood film depictions of historical events tend to coat such representational complexes in a sticky layer of unifying ideology, a mix of consensual categories, stereotypical crises and predictable narrative resolutions. To show the event 'as it really was' is not an alternative. It never 'really was' any *one* thing — past and present alike are sites of contestation where radically different perspectives collide (Burgin and Campany, 2014: 147).

For us as curators, exhibiting *Parzival* in the very heart — or, rather, belly — of the Leuven Library, felt like a chance to create for the visitors the opportunity to reflect on the building's history and the many political controversies surrounding it. At the same time, our project wanted to stimulate reflection on this dark page of history — one that F.T. Marinetti, from a contemporary perspective shockingly and irresponsibly, had sketched as a bright future. The 'Sack of Louvain' turned the centuries-long prominent intellectual life in this flourishing town into a *ground zero* situation. We, as curators, are acutely aware of the painful and painstaking process of recovery and reconstruction in its aftermath. We wished to visualize that trajectory for its commemoration. In that sense, Victor Burgin mentions, in his discussion with Campany, how Henri Bergson inspired him (via Gilles Deleuze) to be interested in the emergence of an "'image,'" which for the artist "is neither a material entity nor simply an optical event, an imprint of light on a retina," but instead "a complex psychological process," which realizes itself es-sentially in a "'virtual (142)'" way.

Again, the example of the young boy comes to mind, as a haecceity, when reflecting upon what Victor Burgin has stated elsewhere:

> Albeit my video work considered as an 'apparatus' is uncinematic, individual works may nevertheless *refer* to cinema — as fragmentary images from films contribute to the memories that, as Henri Bergson insists, are inseparable from visual perception [emphasis in original]. Bergson writes: 'Perception is never a simple contact of the mind with the object present; it is completely impregnated with memory-images which complete and interpret it.' In a commentary on Bergson, Gilles Deleuze adds: 'The real and

> the virtual coexist and enter into a narrow circuit that takes us constantly from one to the other.' What Deleuze calls the 'virtual' aspect of the image will include public knowledge of what is being looked at — historical, philosophical, political, technical, aesthetic, and so on; it will include personal memories, fantasies and feelings; and all of these entail forms of telling. In Deleuze's definition, the 'image' is not confined to the visible, but encompasses an amalgam of affects, knowledges and sensations. The visible world is only ever seen through its prior representations. This is what interested me at the time of my first photographic work, *Photopath*, and this interest continues to inform my current work. The uncinematic is an aspect of the *specificity* of my video practice [emphasis in original](2008: 92-93).

The Wagner Complex

Another reason for bringing *Parzival* to Leuven was that it appears to be fully at odds with the aesthetic strategies and overstated ambitions that underpin the works of artists such as Wagner and Kiefer, while nevertheless preserving an important kernel of hope. As we already mentioned, *Parzival* was generated from a commission by the Modern and Contemporary Art Museum in Geneva, within the context of the Wagner Festival and on the occasion of the bicentennial year of the composer's birth (1813). In his already-mentioned "Note on *Parzival*," Victor Burgin emphasizes how much we remain marked today by the 19th-century framework of thinking that was Wagner's: he mentions Karl Marx, the anarchist thinker Mikhail Bakunin, Charles Dickens, and Jules Verne.

These references were Wagner's — who was a close friend of Bakunin as a young man — but they have remained ours until today. It is often forgotten that Wagner was a radical anarchist as a young man, who increasingly withdrew from his activist commitments in later life, most decisively after having read Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (1818). This personal development led Wagner first to a deep friendship and then to an eventual fallout with Friedrich Nietzsche. In conversation, Victor Burgin indicated that Bryan Magee's book *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy* (2000) had been on his desk during the time that he had been preoccupied with coming to terms with Wagner's multiple commitments to and disengagements from political theory and philosophy.

After having read Schopenhauer, Wagner came to understand music as the highest art form, since according to the philosopher, it allows a direct, immediate expression of our deepest psyche, which he defined

as the Will. Magee elaborates on how Wagner increasingly started to dream of "visible image[s]" to accompany his music (Magee, 2000: 212), which could come to add to the musical experience and deepen it at the same time. Magee informs us that Wagner considered the stage drama in *Parsifal* as the closest he ever got to this ideal, as the "'crowning achievement (212).'" One will, of course, never know if and how Wagner would have made use of film, video or projection techniques, should he have had them at his disposal during his lifetime. But it surely seems fair to say that the well-hinged interaction between sound and images in Victor Burgin's *Parzival* is a subtle response to any such dreams about 'visible images' of "ultimate metaphysical insight (212)" that Wagner was obsessed with, while refraining from entering in a direct dialogue with them.

The *Parzival* wall texts also deepen this reflection. According to Brian Magee, Nietzsche fell out with Wagner on account of, among other reasons, Parsifal's renunciation of the Will, which resulted in his rejection of Kundry. Magee quotes him from *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* (1895), in which Nietzsche viewed this characterization of the *Parsifal* figure as an expression of Wagner's ultimate "*hatred against life* [emphasis in original](320)." Preaching chastity, as done by Wagner in *Parsifal,* was for Nietzsche an "incitement to anti-nature," and an "attempted assassination of basic ethics (320)." Reflecting on this violent rejection by Nietzsche of *Parsifal* in terms of "a *bad* work [emphasis in original] (320)," Burgin's March wall text ponders that Nietzsche's analysis may not exactly correspond to what Wagner had envisaged. Wagner, Burgin writes, wanted his "'music drama' [to be] a form of spiritual, intellectual and emotional bonding of individuals in a sense of community."[15] He continues in the same wall text as follows: "Wagner dreamed of a cultural form that would articulate the shared aspirations and values of an entire people."

Wagner's dream of the so-called *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Burgin concludes, was shattered to pieces because of its populist and fascist recuperation in cinematographic works such as Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1934). However, more than twenty years prior to World War II, the mutilated land of Ypres and the 'raped landscape' where the battles of World War I were fought, had already rendered the longing for any such redemptive 'triumphs' — in the form of, for example, nature's supposed regenerative qualities — profoundly problematic. This finding decisively deflated the romantic ideal of the ruin in its wake. Burgin's *Parzival* carries within itself a critical rejection of an idealized past that is allowed to survive unscathed into the present and it goes against the quasi-religious longing for an ultimate redemption. The only metaphor in *Parzival* that appears to counter-balance any shattered dreams about nature's redemptive potential, is that of water. As an eternal, ongoing

flow of fluidity, it provides a message of hope in the sense that it appears to suggest a "'sea change (Burgin and Campany, 2014: 168),'" as Burgin has called it — a possibility to rebuild without forgetting, to positively draw lessons from a past that is put to rest, and which is not repeated by the specters of the past that raise new polemics.

As has already been pointed out, the elements of hope that can be encountered in *Parzival* are inseparable from their very antitheses: the ruins silently dialogue with the repeated image of the young boy. Illustrating a dimension of 'pure potentiality,' these images of youth and childhood indicate, not the continued presence of what has been allowed to grow old, but the *dis*continuous presence of something that *interrupts* the process of aging. The returning image of the young boy does *not* evolve and it/he remains 'forever young.' Likewise, the large amount of images of ruins in *Parzival* are clearly generated by a computer: they move with a lightness that encounters no force of resistance nor any material constraint. The spontaneous associations triggered by the *topos* of the ruin — a material survival of the past into the present — are thus immediately annihilated by the distinctly *non*-material presence of Burgin's images.

These ruins resist the overblown metaphysics with which they are usually associated because their presentation *as* digital images inherently withstands the process of survival and the promise of redemption that might accompany the visible physicality of paint, sculpture or architecture. The images of ruins in *Parzival* can therefore be considered haecceities of a purely *internal* kind: the unresolved tension and heterogeneity that animate them do not just result from an interplay with some of the other sequences but they belong to their very structure. What is more, and perhaps most fundamental of all, these digital images of ruins find a novel way of bringing to the fore what has been crucial to the medium of video from its very earliest instances onwards: an expression of transience.

Unlike cinema, the medium of video is haunted by the 'nothingness' that is internal to its images. While the shutting down of a cinema projector results in a blank cinema screen but does not affect the film stock itself, switching off a digital projector reduces the images to an absence that is complete. In the round-table discussion with Victor Burgin that accompanied the opening of the Leuven show, the artist mentioned his fascination with what he calls, "the reset."[16] By this he means the ability to "restore [a machine] to the factory conditions: You start again and it takes off to somewhere differently." Using the very same images to express both the ever-present danger of complete disappearance and the equally irreducible capacity to start all over again, *Parzival* is to be understood as an incredibly rich work, which concerns not only the horror of World War I but the human condition at large.

Coda: Unphotographic Time

On various occasions when lecturing on his oeuvre, Victor Burgin has emphasized the fact that his projection works, are "unphotographic," meaning that "you cannot frame them, as they are always fleeting."[17] One reason for doing so, Burgin specifies, is that it allows him to object to the "currently prevailing photographic pictorialism" within contemporary art production.[18] Such an approach, first of all, has practical consequences when illustrating Burgin's projection works in books. The reader should therefore bear in mind, when consulting the color illustration section of this publication, that the stills from *Parzival* follow an inevitable order of framing, which can only provide a very limited experience compared to encountering the work in an installation context.

On a theoretical level, this raises questions with regard to the temporality of Burgin's projection works, which is an issue that has preoccupied him from very early on as an artist. Discussing the works of the Senegalese novelist and filmmaker Ousmane Sembène, Burgin explained—while quoting Homi Bhabha mentioning Franz Fanon—what the "*belatedness of the Black man* [emphasis in original] (Burgin, 1996: 180)" with regard to white culture had taught him as an artist coming into his own. Sembène's films make clear that "what we call 'the present' is not a perpetually fleeting point on a line 'through time,' but a collage of *disparate* times, an imbrication of shifting and contested spaces [emphasis in original](182)." Time as represented in such West-African films needs to be understood as a "collage, […] an assembly of simultaneously present events, but whose separate origins and durations are out of phase, historically overlapping (184)." Only in such a way is one able to grasp "the imbricated time of our global lived space (184)." In that text, Burgin does not sound very optimistic: now that the legitimating role of official history (and also of religion) is destroyed, people live by the tales of our (violent) contemporary visual culture.

From a retrospective point of view, one may understand Burgin's most recent projection works as a reaction to that cultural pessimism, in the sense that it has allowed him to both reinvent and redefine his political engagement in visual art. In "The Uncinematic," he writes about this as follows: "the political meaning of a work of art today is largely determined by its relation to the products and values of the global audio-visual entertainment industries."[19] Burgin references Philip K. Dick's novel *Martian Time-Slip* (1964) in the wall text October.[20] This allows an association to Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), in par-ticular the description of the total destruction of Dresden via bombings by the Allied Forces at the end of World War II. In Vonnegut's novel, the main character, Billy Pilgrim, continuously falls out of time while

engaging in time travel to an imaginary planet called Trafalmadore. With such implicit referencing, no doubt Victor Burgin is sending out a warning message to contemporary society. We may make imaginary travels through space and time as we please; but escapist virtual time travel, as continuously proposed by the mass media (e.g. online and in tourist brochures), are doomed to fail. In its ongoing "reprise" of un-framed visual tropes (Burgin, 2008: 93), alternating sound with silence, Burgin's *Parzival* reminds us that we need not always have our eyes fixed on a mobile phone screen or anything similar in order to invent potential realities:

> at the cinema, you are not permitted to close your eyes. The silences in my video, the places where 'nothing happens', where you may close your eyes, are space where viewers may inscribe their own associations (95).

In response to a question from the editors with regard to when to use the term 'video' or 'projection work,' Burgin writes:

*I use the expression 'projection work' to refer to my moving image works because, although somewhat clumsy, it is the most inclusive and most accurate description. When in 1993 I made my first moving image work (*Venise*) I shot the images on Hi-8 analogue videotape. I subsequently moved to shooting in digital video when the technology became available. In 2010 I made my first projection work (*A Place to Read*) in which the images, albeit broadly 'realistic' in appearance, were generated entirely within a computer. In strictly technical terms, this work (and all those that followed) is a product of 'computer rendering.' I prefer the expression 'projection work' however as it is more readily understandable and can apply both to products of computer rendering and to videos. (Moreover the expression applies equally to those of my 'hybrid' interim works that were shot on analogue video, from which individual frames were extracted, which were then assembled into panoramic still photographs, which were then animated in software and finally output as digital video files.)*

In addition to being more comprehensive the expression 'projection work' is also largely free of inappropriate cultural connotations. The word 'video,' like the word 'film,' refers both to a recording technology and to products of that technology. Unlike 'video,' 'film' may also name a narrative genre – for example, although we might say, 'Her new film was shot entirely on video,' we would be unlikely to say 'She shot her video entirely on film.' Moreover the word 'film,' like the word 'video,' tends to carry connotations of established narrative forms *– fiction or documentary – whereas I consider the narrative forms of my own works to have little in common with these. Again,*

the expression 'video art' names a historical category more or less loosely defined in art books, exhibitions and exhibition catalogues. Whereas I have never considered myself to be a 'video artist,' any more than a 'filmmaker,' and to my knowledge my work has never been included in this category. In referring to my work, the philosopher and film theorist David Rodowick spoke of a "crisis of naming." I believe we are in a time of emergent moving image practices, my own is one, for which we must accept a degree of terminological uncertainty.

Armed with the above explanation I hope it may be left to the reader to understand shifts in terminology throughout the book according to the differing contexts in which the words appear. A 'bottom line'? In the most basic logical terms the relation between 'video' and 'projection work' is non-commutative*: all my videos are projection works, but not all my projection works are videos.*

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Roundtable

Victor Burgin in Conversation with Alexander Streitberger, Stéphane Symons, and Hilde Van Gelder on the Occasion of a Symposium on *Parzival*

October 21, 2014
M – Museum, Leuven

1. On 'Specificity' and the Loop

Hilde Van Gelder (**HVG**): Victor, I suggest our discussion start from a selective presentation of your own ideas that motivated the production of the projection work *Parzival*.

Victor Burgin (**VB**): The work originated in a commission for the Geneva Wagner Festival, to commemorate the bicentenary of Wagner's birth. For many years now my works have been made in response to invitations to visit a place — usually a city, or an individual building. In this case the 'place' is, in effect, Wagner's work. It's become my practice to provide a retroactive note in which I say how the completed work came about. The account is purely factual and in no way offers an interpretation of the work. This note is made available as a handout to visitors when the piece is finally installed, and I believe most people here today will have had the opportunity of picking up a copy of the note on *Parzival*.[24] Rather than repeat what I've already said in the note — although we could perhaps come back to it later — let me begin with a more general issue. I imagine that not everyone here will be accustomed to visiting art installations of the kind currently to be seen across the square in the library, so it might be helpful if I say something about the form of *Parzival*, something to explain why I put the work together in that particular way — which is to say something about the 'specificity' of this kind of 'time-based' work.

Let's start in the 18th-century, with Gotthold Lessing. Lessing inherited an understanding of painting that originated in classical Antiquity, one which brought literary analogies to the appreciation of visual art. Lessing in effect set out to contest the idea that you should approach visual art — in his time, of course, painting and sculpture — through the literary arts. His main argument can be summarized as follows: the literary arts are 'arts of time,' while painting is an 'art of space.' For this reason, poetry and painting are essentially different and the one cannot serve as a model for the other.[25] In the 1960s the American art critic Clement Greenberg brought Lessing's idea — that the various arts have their own 'specificity' — to his defense of abstraction in painting. In Greenberg's Modernist aesthetics, representational content is something that painting must avoid. In fact he said, "content becomes something to be avoided like a plague (Greenberg, 1939/1961: 5)." According to Greenberg, if it's a story you're after then you should go to literature or cinema, it's not the job of painting to tell stories.[26] Greenberg held that painting should not try to *represent* the world but should rather *present* what is *specific to painting alone* — which is paint, on a flat surface. In effect, Greenberg defended the avant-garde painting of the post-war period in terms inherited from the 18th-century. I belong to a generation of artists who rejected Greenberg's Modernism in most of its aspects. Nevertheless, I continue to find the concept of 'specificity' very useful, and believe it has become even more pertinent now, in the so-called 'postmodern' era.

To consider 'specificity' in the case of *Parzival* is to address such questions as, for instance: what does it mean to project a moving image on the wall of a gallery? We are accustomed to seeing moving images all over the place. The gallery, however, has a set of conditions specifically different from those that apply in other spaces. The space of the gallery differs a great deal from the theatrical space of cinema, or the domestic space in which television is viewed, or the various contexts in which images are viewed on iPhones, iPads and other mobile devices. What is perhaps most specific to the situation of the art gallery is the behavior of the viewer. In museums and galleries viewers come and go at unpredictable intervals. You would not normally enter a cinema halfway through the film and leave before the film ends. Certainly there are films that may tempt us to behave like that, but you usually go to the cinema for the classic Aristotelian experience of narrative — a narrative which differentiates itself from real life stories in that it has a beginning, a middle and an end.[27] In the gallery, however, you can enter at any time, assuming the gallery is open, and you can leave whenever you like. You can look at a work in one room, then wander around other rooms before finding yourself again in front of the work you began with. It is this peripatetic spectator that establishes the basic 'specificity' of a

gallery situation. Confusion can arise when expectations formed outside the gallery are not met in the gallery. For example, as a rule — albeit *Parzival* is an exception to this rule — my projection works of recent years do not have a soundtrack. It's not unusual for visitors to my installations to complain to attendants that 'the sound isn't working.' I myself not infrequently get asked: 'Why don't you have any sound?' Or again, when I make a work for a gallery or a museum I am almost invariably asked to say how long the work is. Certainly, if you go to see a film in a cinema you might reasonably ask: 'How long is the film?' But if you go to a museum to see a painting you don't normally ask: 'How long is the painting?' Here, we need to distinguish between the time of the material and the time of the viewing. *Parzival*, for instance, is in the form of a digital image file — a QuickTime movie. If you were simply to play through that file on a computer, it would start at time zero and end about twelve minutes later. But that is not the way I design the work to be experienced. *Parzival* is designed to perpetually *loop*, and to take account of the fact that, in the gallery, one may enter the loop at any point. The loop installs a difference between the time of the material and the time of the viewing. I can say how long the material is, but I have no way of knowing what the time of viewing will be. I know where the beginning of the material is, at the first frame of the digital file, but I don't know which frame will be the first frame to be seen by the viewer.

Many of the same issues are encountered in writing the textual component of the work. My script for the words that will be included in the work — either on the wall, or as intertitles or voice-over — also has a beginning, a middle, and an end. There is inevitably a first and last sentence on the page, just as there is a first and last frame in the digital file, but I cannot know which sentence will be the first sentence to be read by any individual visitor to the gallery. In theory, every sentence should be capable of taking the position of first sentence, just as every image should be capable of becoming the first image. These theoretical requirements can rarely be fully satisfied in practice. In fact I have made only one work that fully meets these conditions. In *Occasio*, which I made for a museum in Siegen earlier this year [2014], you can enter the work at absolutely any time. Everything loops perfectly. It is a 'textbook illustration' response to the requirements of the theory. But even in works where the theoretical demands can't be fully satisfied, they nevertheless exert a strong influence on the form of the work.

HVG: The way you describe the 'specificity' of a gallery work like *Parzival* makes use of the very same argument that Clement Greenberg put forward in order to accuse what he identified as 'video.' All his life, Greenberg fought for and continued to believe in the absolute superiority of Modernist abstract painting and sculpture. He saw it as his duty to defend their supreme medium-specificity. This led him to attack the

fact that the visual arts had opened up to other media. He could not but understand the responsiveness of painting and sculpture to other artistic media in terms of a confusion of the arts — no matter how much his opinion already appeared to be an anachronism by the time he was ventilating it to his audiences. I am referring to the October 1981 issue of *Arts Magazine*, which includes a short polemical essay that reads as a vehement critique on "the present openness and hospitality of the visual art scene to 'intermedia,' 'multimedia,' and the rest of it."[28] In this essay, Greenberg condemns performance works, installation and video art as hybrid forms of visual art. From his point of view, having to ascertain, in the 1980s, that it has become commonly accepted to encounter such 'intermedia' works in museums and galleries, only confirms how much painting and sculpture have been all too friendly to these "extraneous mediums." Greenberg profoundly regrets that this development has not only "affected the medium of pictorial art" but also substantially weakened it.

He proposes an analysis of the situation that deserves a bit more elaboration, as it puts your own projection works — such as *Parzival* — in perspective. The temporal arts, that is — in Greenberg's opinion — "the stage, the concert hall, the literary recital, the printed page, require more or less extended attention." "Drama, music, dance, literature," Greenberg explains, "take place *over* time, not just in it [emphasis in original]." "Visual art," by contrast, "is instantaneous, or almost so, in its proper experiencing, which is of its unity above and before anything else." This categorical distinction between the temporality of experiencing theater, music, and literature on one hand, and the instantaneousness of viewing visual works of art on the other hand, leads Greenberg to a rather striking conclusion with regard to video, performance, and installation art. Since the latter works are shown in "museums, galleries, and other places where visual art is the main thing," he says, the "time factor" at work in the newer arts such as video, performance, and installation, needs to be the same as in painting and sculpture. As a result, in Greenberg's view, the element of time at play within such works both can and needs to be subjected to a "virtual suppression." Of course, this could not differ more from what you have just been explaining to us with regard to *Parzival* or *Occasio*.

Yet, Greenberg's views are along the same lines as your own when he says that museums and visual art galleries allow their visitors to be "sauntered through," since "you sit down only to rest." Exactly here, he writes, lies the difference with theaters and concert halls, which can't be "escaped from" in the same way, without being impolite. It is indeed possible to enter and leave a museum freely and unnoticed, which is not the case for theaters or opera houses. Greenberg urges his readers, in conclusion, to 'suppress' the 'time factor' in "Performance art *et al.*

[emphasis in original]," when confronted with them in a museum or a gallery — this being in line with what he feels one should always do when observing visual works of art. The visitor *can* choose freely how much time to spend with the artwork, but his recommendation is to keep it as instantaneous — thus, as short — as is possible. To put it differently, Greenberg admits that the newer art forms may "ask for an attention span, time," but he adds that "it's so much easier to walk out of a gallery or museum than a theater or concert hall without seeming rude," and so, we should not refrain from doing just that.

It doesn't come as a great surprise then that Greenberg ultimately rejects performance, installation and video works of art, as being prominent examples of truly bad art. This, he holds to be particularly the case for video art, which he esteems to be "boring" — and that should be clear to any real connoisseur of visual art in an instant.[29] Video, for him, is an art from which nothing is to be taken: it doesn't have anything to offer at one glance but its sheer boredom. Bad or "avant-gard*ist*" art [emphasis in original], Greenberg had already explained in an earlier essay, has "little capacity to move and elate you […], except as a momentary apparition (Greenberg, 1971/2003: 17)." This 'momentary apparition' of "Minimal art […], technological, 'funky,' earth, 'process,' 'systems,' etc., etc.," for him, only provides an effect of "phenomenal novelty, and especially spectacular phenomenal novelty (Greenberg, 1971/2003: 12)."[30]

What Greenberg thinks about this kind of 'novelty' artwork is clear from journal entries such as the following, written on May 30, 1977: "Not enough Necessity in Novelty art […]. Too much Necessity is academic, conventional. Too little makes for triviality."[31] For Greenberg, the freedom of experience that video works offer, allows the spectator to be as impolite as she pleases, while rapidly walking in and out of the gallery when she feels urged to. You, on the contrary, have said that it is central for you to work with the temporality of experiencing your projection works on account of structural similarities with psychoanalytical sessions and, for instance, with experiences of uncanniness and the "*déjà vu* [emphasis in original](Burgin, 2010/2011: 199)."

VB: That's interesting. You've just made me aware of the extent to which I've subjected Greenberg to a premature burial — the extent to which, for me, the word 'Greenberg' is simply a metonym for the positions expressed in his essay "Modernist Painting." I don't believe I've read a word of what Greenberg wrote after the 1960s. What you've just told me therefore comes as something of a revelation, as if from a voice from beyond the grave. I find that I agree with him almost completely. With very few exceptions I pretty much share his opinion of performance, installation and video art. Where I disagree with him, and here is where I was most surprised, is where I find myself feeling

that perhaps I'm a better audience for painting than he seems to be! I don't believe a painting can be taken in at a glance. It can be *seen* at a glance, certainly, but seeing is not to be confused with viewing. For me, a painting is an accretion of time, an accumulation and culmination of the painter's activity — in this respect all painting is 'action painting.' The paintings I value are precisely those I find I want to take time with, the ones to which I return. Unlike Greenberg, I would not characterize the works I dislike as 'boring.' To say something is 'boring' is to say something about one's own state of mind, a statement which cannot be contradicted. Greenberg loses *my* attention here (which is to say he becomes 'boring') because he fails to tell me what it is about the work that fails to hold *his* attention. If I were to guess what it is that bothers him, I would say he is 'bored' because the work in front of him is neither inscribed within an existing frame of reference, nor does it succeed in establishing its own terms of reference. I think this is what is at stake when he contrasts 'necessity' with 'triviality.' For example, staying in historical context, I think of the performances that Robert Morris made at Judson Church in the heyday of minimalism. They can be immediately referred to the context of his sculptures, and to the more general context of the 'minimalist problematic' — not least, the question of the limits of sculpture, of what can count as sculpture. The performances are sculpture by other means. By association, I think of a *New Yorker* cartoon that shows a man contorted in an extravagant posture before the desk of his boss, who is saying something like: "Say what's on your mind, the language of dance has always eluded me."[32] Either the boss really does not understand the language of dance, or his employee is addressing him in a 'private language' — which is an oxymoron. In the former case the boss has no access to the realm of necessity, in the latter case he is confronting triviality. In fact, in this cartoon, the boss is giving his employee the benefit of the doubt, he is allowing that the man is really dancing, rather than merely posturing. This is so often what we are asked to do when confronting contemporary art — we are asked to give the work the benefit of the doubt, to accept that there is a structure of necessity that we have not yet been able to grasp, rather than a trivial and 'arty' imposture. I think this is what Greenberg is getting at. If the necessity is imposed from outside, then — to invoke Greenberg's terms again — the work is 'academic.' An academic work is one that can easily be assessed, judged to be more or less successful, because the criteria are known in advance. If the work aspires to be 'contemporary' — not constrained by established convention, not academic — then it should include the means of understanding its necessity. The 'necessity' has to be able to be read off the work itself, has to be constructed from information that the work itself contains. This construction inevitably takes time. So when people ask: 'How long is the work?' I'll reply: 'How long

are you prepared to stay with it?' My works are composed in such a way that they don't reveal themselves immediately. I agree with Greenberg in the importance he gives to 'unity' in a work of visual art (albeit unity is surely a defining characteristic of any work of art worthy of the name, whether 'visual' or not). But I don't agree with him that unity is a thing to be taken in at a glance. Here again we might bring what we might call 'considerations of specificity' to the definition of 'unity.' In the case of my own work, a work such as *Parzival*, the unity is the unity of a dream, or more particularly of the unconscious fantasy as described by psychoanalysis: a small collection of short scenes, metonymic fragments of the repressed that turn around a void—the place allocated to the unknowable object of desire. The fantasy has unity, but not completion—it is *répétition* in the French sense of the term: both repetition and *rehearsal*. Works with this type of unity solicit a form of viewing that is 'layered,' much as a painting may be produced in layers. I do in fact see my works as being closer to painting than they are to cinema. When Greenberg wrote that video invites the spectator to be rude by walking out in the middle he was bringing his habitual ways of viewing cinema and television to the gallery. He can't be blamed for this, as most of the works he would have seen would indeed have been made by artists who were recycling their experience of cinema and television. Even today it seems to me that many moving image works seen in galleries fail to take account of the specificity of their setting. Walking out in 'the middle' of a painting could never be called 'rude' or 'impolite' because the idea of 'middle' here is simply irrelevant. The viewer's coming and going is accepted as a specifically different form of relation to the work—a relation in which the ideas of 'beginning, middle and end' no longer apply. In *Parzival*, as in some other of my works, a further modality of 'coming and going' is inscribed in the space between the images on the screen and the texts on the wall—which are positioned so that they cannot be seen at the same time. The form of the installation of this 'computer generated' work solicits a kind of *interactivity* on the part of the spectator that has nothing to do with what widely tends to be thought of as 'interactive computer art'.

HVG: Yes, of course, one can go back to observe a splendid picture as many times as one desires. But Greenberg would object that this doesn't add anything meaningful to experiencing the painting: "when you linger you lose something (Greenberg, 1981/2003: 95)."

VB: I simply disagree with him. I believe that repetition is fundamental to all of our experience—the experience of a painting cannot be exempt from it. In musical terms, the *ritornello* structure is, by definition, built on the repetition of a phrase. But repetition is impossible.[33] The second time you hear the phrase it is different because you are hearing it through what you have already experienced. The loop has

an analogously *ritornello* structure. The second time the images come around, they are no longer the same for the viewer. The image may be repeated, but the experience is not. Sometimes I play on this by including false repetitions, for example in the form of images that are very closely similar to each other but in fact contain differences. *Parzival* contains an example of this. Alex [Alexander Streitberger, who delivered a lecture on *Parzival* before the roundtable started] has drawn our attention to those few seconds from the Rossellini film, where you see the adolescent boy. That image appears to be repeated three times, but there are in fact three different clips taken from the same scene in the film. I also slightly dilated the clips in time, and reversed the time in one instance. You don't necessarily 'see' those differences, but I believe you nevertheless sense them. As I've already suggested, the experience of the loop in a gallery is closer to the experience of psychoanalysis than it is to cinema. In a loop, any point in time can be a point of departure. Likewise, in psychoanalysis, there is no hierarchy: you are invited to say the first thing that comes to mind. No part of the analysis itself is considered inherently more important than any other. All utterances are equally weighted. They are all, to an equal degree, potential points of departure for a chain of associations. It is that associative chain that again brings the image loop closer to painting than to cinema. Roland Barthes complained that you are not allowed to close your eyes at the cinema.[34] In my work, to the contrary, there are places where you are invited to close your eyes. At a certain moment in *Parzival* I have the music play over a black screen, precisely so that viewers may form their own mental images on the basis of what they hear. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Parsifal* (1982) seems to have the opposite intention. It sets out to *illustrate* Wagner, and I am struck by how the presence of the actors in this film diminishes the music. Wagner's music becomes 'film music,' an ever-present hazard for our ears today — not least as so many composers for the cinema stole their harmonic ideas and orchestration from Wagner. I try to interpolate a different kind of spectator: the spectator of *Parzival* differs from the one who sees a film in the cinema. More akin to the viewer of a painting, her or his attitude is a more contemplative one than the attitude of a spectator in the cinema. In the cinema you don't contemplate. You are carried along. Contemplation involves activity on the part of the spectator. For this reason, my works are incomplete and full of gaps. The connective tissue is not there. It is up to the spectator to provide it. Obviously, the spectator can choose not to provide it. But the ideal spectator — as conceived by Louis Althusser, another champion of 'specificity' — does exactly this.[35] Broadly speaking, there are two notions of 'specificity' that are important to me. One has come via Greenberg from Lessing, this involves a close attention to what differentiates one art practice from another art practice.

Figure 24

Victor Burgin, *Solito Posto*, 2008, digital video loop, 12 m 35 sec.

The other notion of 'specificity' comes from Althusser and involves a close attention to the particularity of political practices. Feminism taught us much the same lesson: there isn't a single 'politics,' practiced mainly through the institution of political parties. The political is woven throughout the fabric of everyday life—everywhere where there are disparities of power and privilege. Consequently, there is, for

example, a politics of the domestic space — a politics of the kitchen, a politics of the bedroom. This recognition of the specificity of the political invites us to consider what the specificity of the politics of an art practice may be. Only through this may one finally disabuse oneself of the widespread illusion that the politics of an artwork may be simply read from its contents.

2. Interruption and 'Redemption'

Alexander Streitberger (**AS**): I would like to elaborate a bit on the question of the loop. Since the first year of the 21st century, you have often integrated panoramas in your videos and projection works. In a certain sense, this technique constructs a loop within a loop because the structure of the panorama is also something without an end or beginning. Why do you integrate these panoramas and how is this linked to the question of 'specificity'?

VB: The 'loop within a loop,' as you observe, is a *mise-en-abyme* that reflects the overall form of the work, the form that I've argued belongs to a realm of necessity imposed by spectatorial behavior in the gallery setting. The 'second time around' is never the same. We are not in the realm of repetition but in the realm of *reprise*. The schematic figure of reprise is not a closed circle, it is a *spiral*. As I've said, I play on this in *Parzival* with those barely perceptible differences between the image of the boy. In some other works, I make more obvious play with the idea. In *Solito Posto* (2008), for instance, there is a 360-degree panorama of a square in Venice (fig. 24). As the camera moves around you see people sitting at a table outside of a café. When the camera returns to the café, having completed its 360-degree sweep, the people are gone and the café is closed. If you enter the work at a different point then this sequence of events will be experienced in reverse order. Everything else in the image remains the same, the camera moves but what it shows is still; the clouds are motionless in the sky, but there is nevertheless the implication of movement, as it were, 'behind the back' of the camera. Using conventional means — a regular film or video camera — the effect would have been totally naturalistic. The effect in *Solito Posto* on the other hand, is literally 'supernatural' in that it doesn't fully belong to the physical world. Similarly, the panorama in this work, as in other works of mine, implies an immaterial, disembodied, point-of-view. The panorama is produced from a number of overlapping stills that are then stitched together into a single continuous image. In order for this 'stitching' to be seamless it is necessary that the 'nodal point' of the camera lens be directly over the center of rotation of the camera — this is the only way to avoid the effects of 'parallax' that would

make seamless stitching impossible. The point-of-view of an eye that turns on a dimensionless point is impossible in terms of natural vision in the real world, it is the supernatural vision of an incorporeal entity. There are also disembodied 'ghostly' viewpoints in *Parzival*. In the camera movement down the ruined street you glide right through the rubble. Nothing hinders you. There is no physical body there.

AS: I find it extremely interesting, the way you use the term "disembodied eye" in this context. As Martin Jay puts it, Cartesian dualism valorizes the disembodied eye as "a fully spectatorial rather than incarnate eye, the unblinking eye of the fixed gaze rather than the fleeting glance (Jay, 1993: 81)." In the course of the 20th-century, this model, built on the idea of the superiority of the eye, has been largely challenged. In phenomenology and, subsequently, in Minimal art, vision is based on an embodied and active consciousness that includes, beyond the eye, also the other senses and the experience of the body. Yet, if I understand well, your use of the term contrasts with the Cartesian tradition. Rather than disconnecting the visual experience from the body, the 'disembodied eye' of the virtual camera frees the spectator to identify with the body of another person (the actor or the cameraman), which finally turns him back to his own visual and bodily experience within a specific physical, psychological, and social context.

VB: The 'disembodied eye' is a theoretical construct rather than an experiential category. The viewer is by definition embodied, and inevitably brings kinesthetic memory to the image — cinema would be impossible otherwise. Film theory describes how the camera's point-of-view is given to the spectator, who is thereby 'sutured' into the embodied subject-position of the actor on the screen. Robert Montgomery's film noir *Lady in the Lake* [1947] is usually cited as the extreme example of the attempt to literally embody the camera. The story is seen and narrated entirely from the hero's point-of-view. When the hero is knocked unconscious, the image on the screen blurs and fades to black. For me the issue is not seeing, as such, but rather the perspectival system of representation — a particular way of representing a three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface. As we all know, although this system originated in 15th-century Italy, it was based on geometrical and optical principles first described in the Arab world. Islamic culture, however, was uninterested in such an application of these principles; neither the Islamic pictorial tradition nor those of such civilizations as Egypt and China show much interest in perspective. Perspective becomes the dominant mode of representation in the West at the same time that mercantile capitalism and colonialism are emerging; new systems of mapping and navigation are being developed at this same time. This has led many cultural theorists to equate 'perspective' with a literally *commanding* point-of-view, one that makes all things and all space

subservient to itself. So a prevailing understanding of perspectival representation has been to see it as an instrument of domination — we can think here of Michel Foucault's description of the panopticon, and the feminist assimilation of the point-of-view to an 'oppressive male gaze.'[36] Already we can see the slide from a contingent system of representation, one system amongst others, to *seeing* itself. In a naïve view, perspectival representation *reproduces* natural vision — and it's clear that at the origins of perspective Brunelleschi was setting out to achieve precisely this. In the contrary view of the cultural theory I've mentioned, perspectival representation is an artifice *imposed* upon natural vision, which it impoverishes in the process. We can turn to Ernst Gombrich for the origins of a further view, one that relativizes the system and sees it as a 'symbolic form,' one convention of representation amongst others. Moreover, as Gombrich and others inform us, there was never just one single method of perspectival representation. In the Renaissance there were a number of them, adapted to different situations — for example, the depiction of architecture, or the rendering of a head. There were linear methods and curvilinear methods, and so on. Robin Evans (1995) has written wonderfully about this. The fact remains, however, that photography and cinema have had the effect of overwhelmingly endorsing a naturalist view of the perspectival system, which has in effect overwritten non-Western pictorial traditions to become the de facto hegemonic global system of visual representation. The fact that perspective is not natural, the fact that it leaves out such facts of embodiment as binocular vision and movement, all this has been recognized since its inception, but it has become widely disavowed. One of the things that interests me now about computer generated 3D representations of the world is the possibility that virtual cameras may offer the means of dissolving the unholy alliance between perspectival projection and ideology that physical cameras may be seen as having created. As its name attests, the modern camera is in direct line of descent from the camera obscura, an instrument intimately implicated in the development of perspective. The virtual cameras of computer modelling inherit this same legacy of projective geometry but are not constrained by the physical phenomena — observed from the passage of light via a pinhole — they nevertheless aspire to emulate. Virtual cameras continue the line of descent of perspectival representation that photographic and film cameras incorporate, but may also interrupt it.

Stéphane Symons (**SS**): Connecting this to *Parzival*, the already-mentioned image of the little boy that you borrow from Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* comes back to my mind. Because of the loop and because of the slight changes that result from the repetition of this image, it has what one could call an interruptive effect. It might sound farfetched but this interruptive effect almost seems to come together with

a redemptive quality. In the original context from which the image is borrowed, it has no redemptive effect whatsoever: *Germany Year Zero* ends with a meaningless suicide. However, since your work interrupts this original context, it remains a beautiful image of a little boy and is thereby saved from these bad associations. I was wondering whether this redemptive quality is important to you.

VB: I hadn't thought about that. What you say made me think of the idea of the 'reset.' We all have machines these days that we can restore to 'factory settings' with the press of a button. Things go wrong, you press a button and everything is reset, so you can start again and maybe take off in a different direction. I'm made to think that perhaps those intervals of black in my work, the 'intertitles' without writing, allow for a kind of reset — a place where you can pause to reflect before taking off in a different direction. I can see the connection of the idea of redemption with the returning image of the boy, as that image also may serve as a place where one may switch tracks onto different lines of association. The boy serves as the point of intersection of the two stories: the film and the opera. In the film, the boy poisons his sick father after a former school teacher inculcates him with the fascist doctrine that the weak must perish if the strong are to survive. The boy's individual act in effect recapitulates actions that the Nazis had performed at the national level. The boy finds that no one to whom he subsequently turns can offer him redemption — the act is inherently irredeemable. In Wagner's opera the boy Parsifal, grown to adulthood, is the agent of Kundry's redemption — who dies having received it. In the clip from *Germany Year Zero* we see the boy receiving a kiss from his adult sister, just as Parsifal receives Kundy's kiss in the opera, the kiss that opens the road to her salvation and death. The alternation of active and passive roles in all this may perhaps posit redemption not as a goal to be achieved but rather as a perpetual questioning: what acts may be redeemable? Who may offer redemption? Of course in Wagner's *Parsifal* such questions arrive, as it were, 'pre-answered' by Christian mythology.

SS: Certainly, in the context of a discussion about a work that starts from Richard Wagner it is very interesting to talk about interruption and reset. Wagner's works operate through motives and thematic developments. As a listener you can almost experience these developments as the power of fate running its brutal course. Interrupting such motives through the *ritornello* seems to allow certain images to disrupt this power and thereby acquire an almost utopian quality. Let's take that example of the image of the kiss. This image has a lot of different layers of meaning: it is seductive, motherly and tender all at once. It is a kiss of love and a kiss of passion at the same time. But it also marks an awakening. In Wagner's opera, the kiss marks the moment when Parsifal hears his name for the first time. This moment allows him to

take a distance from nature and to enter into a cultural, historical and human context. I see a parallel with your work. In *Parzival*, you often make use of thematic tropes like the ruin and the landscape. These are images of nature taking over. Still, at the same time, you give a *historical* index to these images. In *Parzival*, we see the ruins of Venice but also the ruins of postwar Berlin. Ruins are here not just symbols of natural regeneration but also witnesses of a loss that cannot be overcome. Is this too far-fetched?

VB: Not at all. What comes to my mind is Lacan's expression: "the metonymic ruins" of the object — the object, of course, being by definition "lost (Lacan, 1957/1998: 39);" he speaks of the "debris" produced by the phenomenon of forgetting (Lacan, 1953/1988: 48). Landscapes and human individuals bear the scars and ruins of personal and political history, and actual ruins inevitably carry an allegorical charge. Ruins are not exclusively things of the past, they can also be present sites of reconstruction. As individuals we're perpetually trying to gather and hold together the scraps of our existence, relationships, works,…we're all in a sense our own versions of the "angel of history" that Walter Benjamin saw as beating its wings against the storm blowing it into the future (Benjamin, 1940/1970: 259-260).

HVG: In order to avoid misunderstandings, Victor, can you clarify some of these ideas about the sacred, the Holy Grail, and so on — topics on which you elaborate in the wall texts accompanying the projection work in installation context?[37] I do not think your work is Messianic and I am sure you do not mean to suggest that either. But your use of these notions that are overloaded with references and connotations — such as 'redemption' — may require some further explanation.

VB: I don't think I'm unusual in being led by my experience of contemporary life to feel that there are words that need to be revisited, words we have long abandoned. We don't have many words at our disposal to say what we are missing in a world ruled almost entirely by greed and violence. We are throwing away a lot if we allow words such as 'redemption,' 'spiritual,' 'sacred,' to remain hostages to religious dogma and other forms of irrationalism. For example, I've recently found myself using the word 'contemplative' — another discredited and outmoded word I very rarely used in the past. In the sense of its Latin root, *contemplare*, it means to look attentively, thoughtfully. The *templum* is a place for the interpretation of signs. Maybe it is time to try out such words again, to see if there is anything in them that can be — precisely — *redeemed* from their appropriation by mysticism. Here, however, we are using 'redemption' in a very modest way, the way one used to take empty bottles back to the grocer where they could be 'redeemed' for a few coins. The French word used in this context would be '*récuperé*.' Althusser used the term, and in the 1970s the expression

'non-recuperable' entered English left cultural critique via those who were reading Althusser in English translation. For example, one would speak of the necessity of making works of art that were 'non-recuperable' to bourgeois ideology and/or the market system. The association with non-returnable bottles might conceivably have been tolerated on the Left at that time, but any association to the idea of redemption would certainly not have been! But 'redemption' does not necessarily have to imply only the Christian mysticism of Wagner's *Parsifal*. In the literal narrative the hero Parsifal brings redemption to Kundry, but for me the opera *Parsifal* is redeemed by Kundry—who is really the only interesting character in the work. She nevertheless gets very little space, so I gave her the entire stage in my own piece. She knows much more about 'redemption' than Parsifal does, and she has the best lines in the opera. When she kisses Parsifal in the garden he recoils in horror, but also has a revelation of the source of the world's pain. Kundry says: "If one kiss can do this, imagine what an hour could do?"[38] Wonderful!

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View of *Parzival* Wall Texts

General installation view of *Parzival*

View of *Parzival*

Outside view of exhibition entrance with, on each side of the entrance door, two commemorative plaques referring to the destruction and rebuilding of the Leuven University Library

Inside view of exhibition entrance