Victor Burgin's *Parzival* in Leuven

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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.

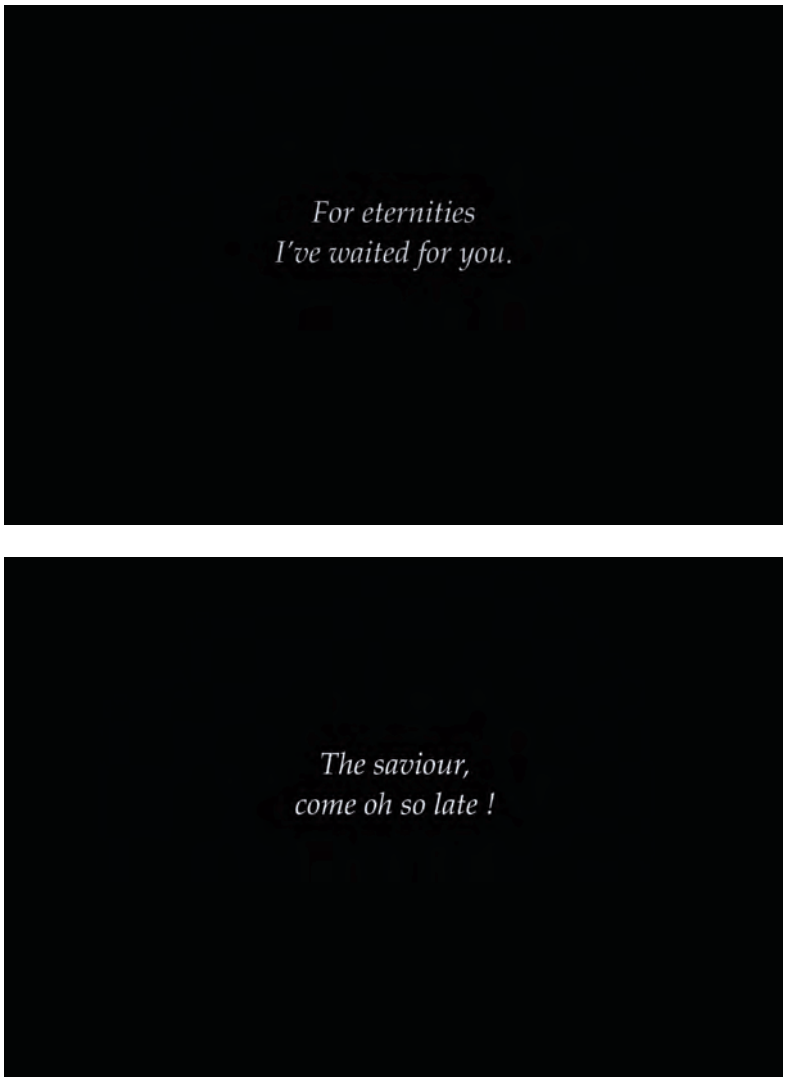

Figure 8

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

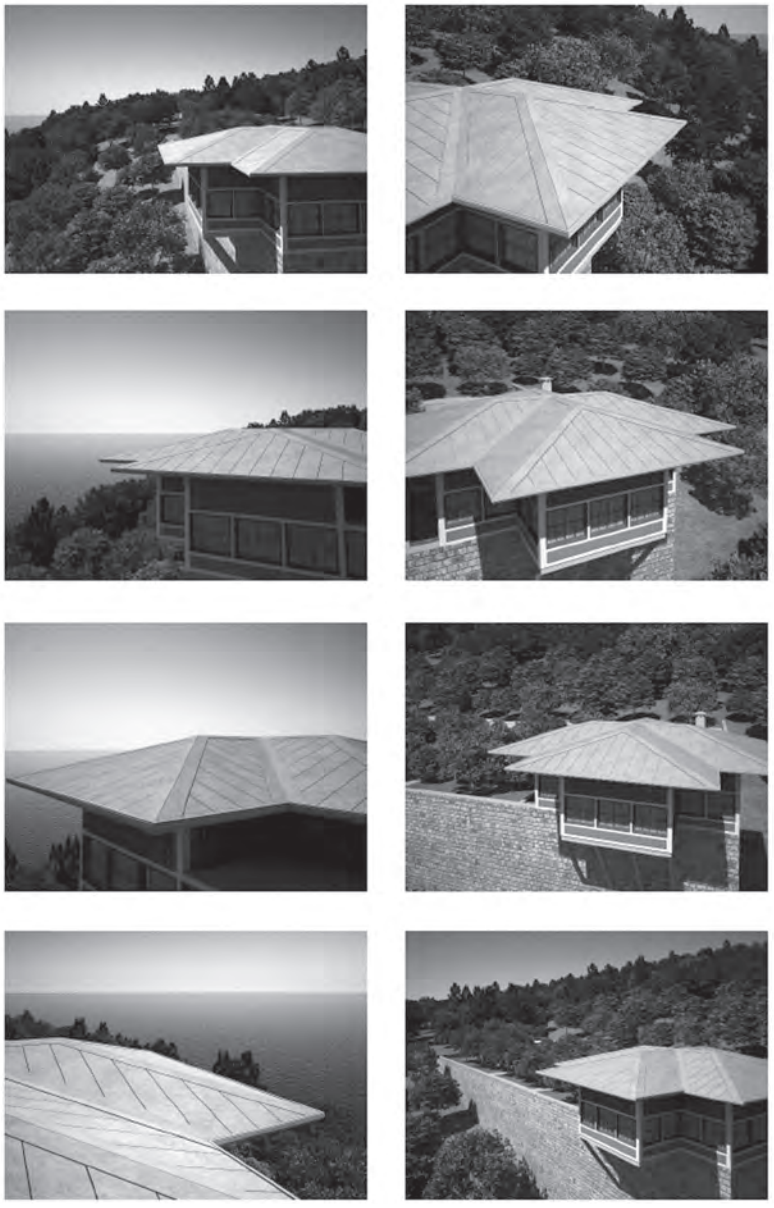

Figure 13

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

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

View of *Parzival* Wall Texts

General installation view of *Parzival*

View of *Parzival*