



Victor Burgin: on apparatus



Victor Burgin is a British artist and writer who lives in France. He is professor emeritus of history of consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz and emeritus Millard chair of fine art at Goldsmiths in London. For over 40 years his prolific work on photography and what he terms “the apparatus” that surrounds it has made him one of the most important living writers on the photographic and digital image. In addition to *The Camera: Essence and Apparatus* (2018), which forms the occasion for this conversation,

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Burgin's many books include *Parallel Texts: Interviews and Interventions about Art* (2011), *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity* (1986), and *Thinking Photography* (1982). His visual work – represented in public collections from the Tate Modern to the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Museum of Modern Art, New York – has formed the basis for monographs such as *Victor Burgin's Parzival in Leuven: Reflections on the "Uncinematic"* (2017), *Barthes / Burgin* (2017) and *Components of a Practice* (2008).

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Interview by Thomas Roueché

No copy risks eternal life amongst memories of cruelty and injustice. In Afterlife the organic life reflex of putting a disturbing recollection out of mind results in its erasure. Traces of deleted memories may nevertheless persist in the form of apparently inexplicable occurrences.

The quotation above and images throughout are excerpted from Burgin's text/image book *Afterlife* (MACK, forthcoming)

Thomas Roueché The most recent essay in your book is titled "Now and Then: Commodity and Apparatus". How has your thinking about photography as a commodity shifted over your career?

Victor Burgin I took up photography in the late 1960s because, at that time, it had little or no commodity value. In common with some others of my generation I'd become tired of the constant intrusion of money into art: money was needed to make "serious" gallery art, and commerce always had its finger on the scale when the value of a work was weighed. Photography and writing were cheap and ephemeral. I was also tired of the hermeticism of art in the aftermath of modernism and minimalism. Photographs and writings were encountered throughout ordinary everyday life. Anyone could produce them and no one need feel excluded by them. Moreover, primarily by way of the media, camera images and words contribute massively to the formation of dominant beliefs and values. Working with photography and writing allowed me to bring my art practice into dialogue with this aspect of the sociopolitical process. It allowed me to think critically about my personal work while taking into account its place in the broader environment of representational practices beyond the confines of art.

TR Is this thinking "beyond the confines of art" where the idea of the apparatus comes in? You explain the idea in your article, but could you say more here about what you mean by "apparatus"?

VB Think of the 1999 film *The Matrix*. The Matrix is a world unquestioningly accepted as reality by the majority of those who inhabit it. But in actuality their world is a simulation, designed to keep them quiescent while their life forces are sucked out of them by parasitical machines. Beginning with the financial deregulation of the Thatcher-Reagan years the "art world" progressively became a Matrix world, the energies of its inmates orchestrated and harvested for the ultimate benefit of the hyper-rich. We might also think of what Marx and Engels called "false consciousness". For example, the labour unionist campaigning under the slogan: "A fair day's wage for a fair day's labour." He or she fails to see that in reality the system of wage-labour is itself inherently unfair, systematically exploitative, in that wealth created by the worker is siphoned off in the form of dividends paid to shareholders. For Marx and Engels, profits are unpaid wages. I offer these analogies as pictures of situations in which a reality is fundamentally misrecognised by those who inhabit it. This is what is essential to the idea of "apparatus" first put forward by Bertolt Brecht. For Brecht, the "apparatus" is the totality of the means of cultural production: from the financial and political elites who control such institutions as museums and arts foundations, through the organisation of the various technological modes of production, through publicity and promotion, and so on. I first quoted Brecht on the apparatus in an essay published in 1969 and can do no better than cite him again now. He writes: "imagining that they [artists and critics] have got hold of an apparatus which in

fact has got hold of them ... leads to a general habit of judging works of art by their suitability for the apparatus without ever judging the apparatus by its suitability for the work. People say, this or that is a good work; and they mean (but do not say) good for the apparatus. Yet this apparatus is conditioned by the society of the day ...an innovation will pass if it is calculated to rejuvenate existing society, but not if it is going to change it.” Since Brecht, the idea of the apparatus has been elaborated in much greater detail; first by Michel Foucault and then by such writers as Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben.

TR How does Michel Foucault take the idea of apparatus further in his work?

VB Brecht draws our attention to the financial and political interests that determine “institutions” in the more familiar, sociological, sense of the word. Foucault draws attention to the languages spoken within and between them, to discursive institutions. For Foucault, discourse does not “express” the meanings of a pre-existent social order, but rather constructs those meanings and that order. For the sake of simplicity, let’s think of discourse as “ways of talking”. For example, when in 2001 I began to teach in a London art school after an absence of some 15 years in California, I was surprised by changes I might not have noticed if I had simply lived through them. One of these changes was in the use of the word “artist”, a word I now frequently heard embedded in the expression: “as an artist”. The expression could occur at either the beginning or the end of a statement. I was surprised when I first heard an undergraduate art student begin a sentence with: “As an artist, I...” It was as if I had been confronted by a first-year medical student who had said to me: “As a doctor, I...” Then I was more surprised when another student told me he was “doing sociology as an artist”. I asked him if he would be happy to have a tooth filled by someone “doing dentistry as an artist”. In a Sartrean perspective the man “doing sociology as an artist” may be seen as doubly in “bad faith” – as a man playing at being an artist in order to be an artist playing at being a sociologist. In the art school to which I awoke after my Rip Van Winkle-like sleep on a California hill, the meaning of “artist” seemed assumed to be self-evident, and to imply an imaginary of the artist as a being endowed by nature with faculties denied to others. The identity “artist” here is a discursive construct masquerading as a natural condition. This is one example of the role of language in the production of a Matrix world in which things appear other than they are. As another example, we might take the discursive construct “political art” used to name art with an overt political content – as if the content alone made it political. The political import specific to art, however, is in its form; its content is largely irrelevant. Jacques Rancière, for example, said that in trying to understand the movement of political history he found it more valuable to read Virginia Woolf than Émile Zola. From Woolf, he derived insights into how time is lived in compressions and distensions that allowed him to

think through problems that at the level of content appear to have nothing to do with what Woolf was writing about. In the conventional genre of “political art” a work is political only in the way the media understands the term. Typically, practitioners of “political art” encounter their subject matter not at first hand but from the media. The audience for their artworks will instantly recognise and understand the issues represented in terms already established by the media. As such artworks solicit the same range of interests and the same reading competences that the media assumes in its audience, they stand easily alongside the other types of work typically offered in art fairs and biennales, not least those providing spectacle, decoration or scandal; we do not leave the discursive space of the mass media, we simply turn the page or change channels. “Political art”, moreover, pre-empts criticism: as the artist’s intention is “political”, then it is irrelevant to criticise the work on aesthetic grounds, but as the work is “artistic” then it is equally irrelevant to require a rigorous political analysis from it. As Theodor Adorno remarked in a different context: “it both presents itself as didactic, and claims aesthetic dispensation from responsibility for the accuracy of what it teaches.” A minority of artists make work with an overt political content that is also fully resolved in aesthetic terms. The source of my unhappiness here is best expressed by the film critic Serge Daney in his comment on an artistically contrived cinematic scene of a violent death in a Nazi concentration camp. For Daney it is a matter of feeling “ashamed to be considered as having to be aesthetically seduced where it is only a matter of conscience ... of being human and nothing more”. Such artists instrumentalise the misery of others while parading their moral narcissism in pursuit of their careers. Meanwhile, as the political-art circus moves noisily around the fair and biennale circuit, the majority of artists teaching in art schools today live quietly and precariously from one short contract to the next, their lives subject to coercively technocratic managerial practices aimed at subordinating the entire educational sphere to the market-driven needs of business. On graduation most of the young artists these teachers produce provide a labour pool of discard-after-use workers for low-paying, low-skilled jobs without retirement benefits. There was no shortage of political posturing in the art school to which I returned in 2001, but I very quickly came to feel that I would prefer as my colleague the artist who makes watercolours of sunsets but stands up to the administration, to the one who makes radical political noises in the seminar room and gallery but colludes in imposing educationally disastrous management and marketing policies on the department. To refuse to cooperate with “obligatory” but intellectually ridiculous research control exercises, to refuse to join “compulsory” training days for academic staff run by private management-training consultancies, these are examples of political action. The work of “political artists” usually harms no one, and I would defend their right to make it; what I cannot accept is the lazy and self-serving assumption that it is somehow political in effect – a Matrix-world illusion that relieves

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them of the responsibility and danger of acting politically in terms specific to the institutional and societal contexts in which they find themselves.



TR So is this what you mean when you write: “One of the most faded clichés in the tapestry of received ideas woven by the art apparatus is that art is ‘subversive’. To the contrary, art has been subverted”?

VB It’s a part of it. Since about the 1980s both the artistic and academic milieus have been brutally redefined – wall-to-wall, attic to basement. As one academic put it: “The barbarians are no longer at the gate, they’re in the kitchen drinking tea.” The same period that has seen the university come to assess intellectual production in terms of instrumentalised economic performance, in terms of money and mass audiences, has also been the period that has seen the introduction of league tables of artists ranked according to their prices at auction, and lists of curators and dealers ranked according to their “power”. In the essay you began with I quote a publisher’s blurb for a book that “abandons the false distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture in favour of a borderless world where pop music and sculpture, literature and film, TV and painting are all part of the same vision”. The blurb describes the book as “ambitious and mould-breaking” but this “vision” has been the doxa for decades – it’s the same vision that has had

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universities change the job title of chancellor to chief executive officer. When I returned to the UK I was surprised not only by changes in the language with which art students referred to themselves. I was further surprised when an academic colleague asked me who my “line manager” was, and when I was told of an expensive initiative to “enhance our brand”. These were my first encounters with that monolinguisism of the neoliberal university in which the arts, humanities and sciences in common are now required to think and express themselves in the language of the School of Business and Management. We are not obliged to accept a hierarchical language of “high” and “low” to recognise that there can be substantive differences of world view between cultural practices, ways of being in the world other than those promoted by industrial popular culture and marketing. The Belgian philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers has judged that the university is in effect finished, and we now need to think about how what was once the work of the university may be carried on in other ways. I feel much the same about today’s mainstream “art world”. I’m reminded of a remark Fredric Jameson made many years ago: “Thinking anything adequate about commercial television may well involve ignoring it and thinking about something else.” Such thinking necessarily takes place within actually existing society. We, unlike the heroic protagonists of the film, have no place outside the Matrix from which to intervene in it. Stengers therefore speaks of “the possibility of creating interstices ... which give another texture to our world by [their] capacity to pass across and through the ... apparatuses ... to create and resist in the present, and not in a messianic mode.”

TR You say that one of the things that interests you about photography is that it has always been an “amateur” practice. Could you say more about this?

VB The way the word “amateur” is used is symptomatic of the society in which we live. On the one hand amateur can refer to someone who engages in an activity for its own sake rather than for financial gain. On the other hand the word is used to refer to someone unqualified, even inept. The implication is that someone who isn’t making money from what they’re doing can’t be very good at it. This makes value judgements in art suddenly very easy. What is good is what makes money – “the market is never wrong”. I prefer the way Roland Barthes uses the word. Barthes says that what defines the amateur is not necessarily a lesser knowledge or an inferior technique, it’s rather a different relation to desire. The amateur, he says, has a non-hysterical relation to her or his work. Barthes’ idea of the hysterical position derives from Jacques Lacan: the hysteric identifies with the lack in the Other, and desires to be what the Other desires. The hysteric is the one who puts on a show, and the message of the show is “Look at me!” But to set out to attract attention is necessarily to accommodate oneself to an idea of what it is the other wants. The fact need not be laboured that over recent decades the art world has progressively

merged with the worlds of fashion, publicity and pop-celebrity culture – the “land of look at me” where narcissism and market research live as lifetime companions. But it is less obvious just how normalised the hysterical attitude has become at every level. I think again of my experience of returning to teach in an art school after a 15-year absence. In the course of a guest tutorial visit to the studio of an MA student I hadn’t previously met, I asked what advice he had received from his primary tutor. The student replied: “He told me I needed to get out to the galleries more, to see what people are interested in.” This is precisely the kind of professional training that produces the people Jean-Luc Godard calls “the professionals of the profession”.

TR You began by saying how, in the 1960s, you turned in your work to photography. How is this relationship to photography troubled by the advent of digital image-making? To ask Yuk Hui’s question, how can digital objects be understood?

VB What I understand Yuk Hui to mean by a “digital object” is data in digital form organised by an algorithm. A digital photograph of your cat, a fire-breathing dragon in a videogame, the gamer’s medical records on a hospital computer, are all digital objects. Yuk Hui develops his idea of “digital objects” by extension from what Gilbert Simondon calls “technical objects”. Simondon opposes the view in which technology is seen simply in terms of the “tool”, the means by which humans manipulate nature. In this view technology appears, in Derrida’s sense of the word, as a “supplement”. In his 1994 book, *Technics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, Yuk Hui’s mentor and collaborator Bernard Stiegler retells the story of how Prometheus went to the workshop of the god Hephaestus and stole fire – the symbol of technology – and through this attribute brought humankind into the world. What Stiegler finds significant in this myth is that technology was given not to a being that already existed; rather, it was only through this gift that humans came into being. In this view, which receives empirical support in the work of the palaeontologist André Leroi-Gourhan, technology is not something added to humankind, something supplementary, it is the very condition of its possibility. Simondon moreover emphasises that tools, machines, do not exist in isolation, they are part of the whole way of life of the culture that produces them. “Technology” therefore is not to be reified as a stand-alone transhistorical and transcultural entity. Yuk Hui gives the example of the historian who observes that in the 13th century paper-making technology in China was “more advanced” than it was in the West. Such a pronouncement, Hui says, treats technology as if it were something independent of the cultures – he prefers the word “cosmologies” – within which it emerged. The technic therefore is to be conceived of as not only inextricably imbricated within the corporeal, as prosthesis, but also within belief systems, the aesthetic, the affective, and so on. So my first step in understanding the digital object is to think of it as being, like the machine that produces it,

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similarly enmeshed within a culturally specific way of life. For all this may sound obvious, it is a view of technology radically distinct from that of such influential media theorists as Friedrich Kittler, who in the opening sentence of his preface to his 1986 book *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* states simply: “Media determine our situation.” Having noted this fundamental way in which the digital object is like the technical object, the next step is to note the fundamental way in which it is unlike the technical object. Simondon explicitly states that the technical object is a material thing. The digital object however is immaterial – which for me is its most significant characteristic.



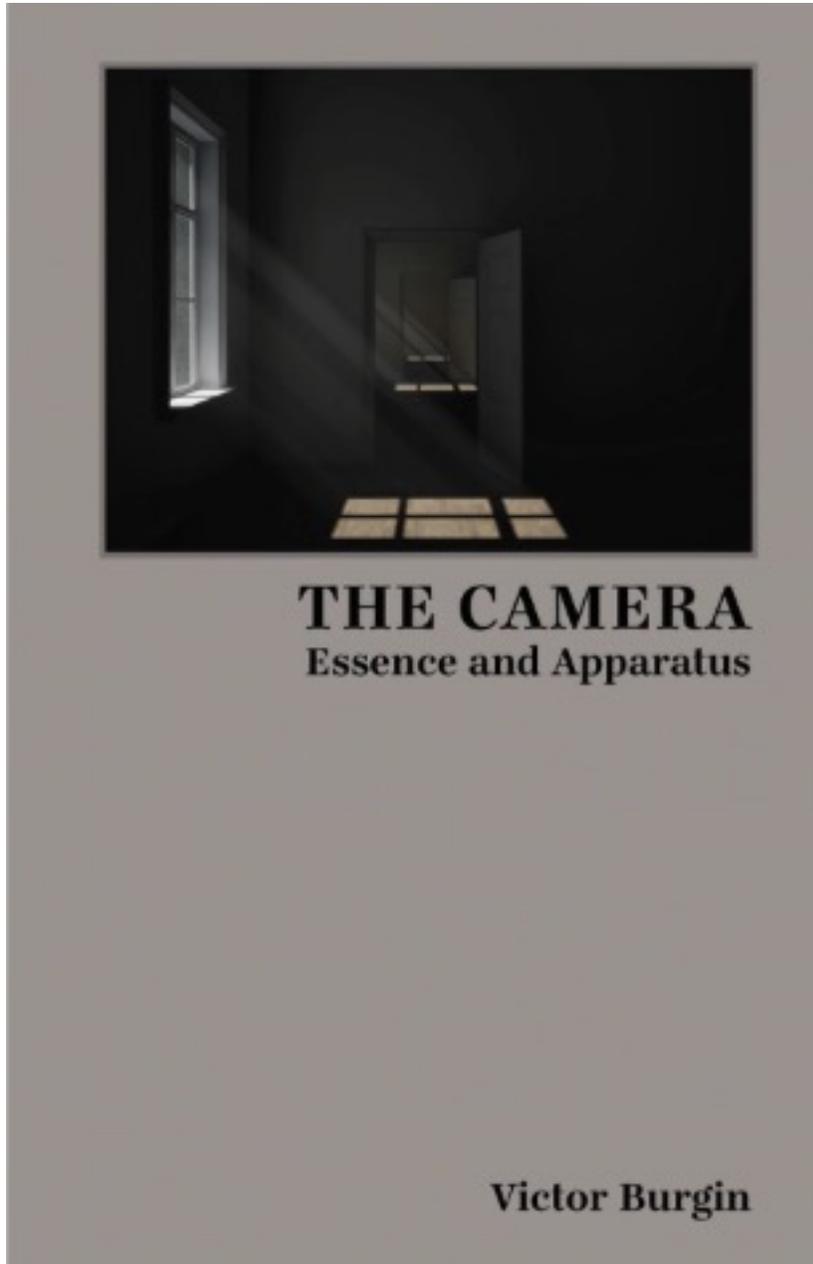
TR In one of your essays you discuss Stiegler’s work on “temporal objects” in the context of Jia Zhangke’s 2004 film *The World*, and the synchronisation of consciousness that emerges from cultural globalisation. Are digital objects and temporal objects related?

VB The temporal object is an idea that Stiegler takes from Edmund Husserl. A temporal object is one that elapses in synchrony with the consciousness that apprehends it – Husserl gives the

example of a melody. For Stiegler, cinema is the exemplar of the industrial production of temporal objects and the synchronised consciousnesses that ensue. In his 2004 book *De la misère symbolique* (“Of Symbolic Misery”), Stiegler describes the audiovisual industry in general as a totalising and potentially totalitarian machine for the production of uniform consciousnesses. He gives the example of the audience who watch the same television news programme at the same time every day. He says that this apparent communality results not in a “we” (*nous*) but a “one” (*on*) – a synchronised deindividualised mass that comes to share the same industrially produced memory. This mass becomes in effect the same person, which is to say, according to Stiegler, no one. In my own small book of 2004, *The Remembered Film*, I object that Stiegler leaves out of his account the capacity of unconscious processes to break up and redistribute – to appropriate Deleuze’s word, “deterritorialise” – whatever is imprinted on consciousness. As I put it in the last line of *The Remembered Film*: “... the film we saw is never the film I remember.” In the philosophical tradition within which Stiegler and Yuk Hui work, there is a shift from the pre-industrial natural object through the industrial technical object to the present digital object. Unlike the objects of philosophical enquiry that precede it, the digital object is immaterial, but I would argue that it is not the only immaterial object, there is also the psychical object. The fire-breathing dragon on the gamer’s screen is a component of the gamer’s psychical reality, and one that elapses in synchrony with their consciousness as their avatar does battle with it. The digital object and the temporal object are fused in the psychical object. Here is where we have to turn from philosophy to psychoanalysis, a discipline no less concerned with objects, albeit of a radically different kind. The very history of psychoanalytic thought could be mapped with reference to psychical objects: “part object” in Freud, “good and bad object” in Klein, “transitional object” in Winnicott, “objet petit a” in Lacan, and so on. What the digital object and the psychical object have in common is that they are both virtual. I find I need to insist on the common virtuality of digital and psychical objects in the face of the tendency of thinking about contemporary visual culture to collapse into the gravitational field of “media”, which I see as a regressive prioritisation of the empirical materiality of the machine. The Russian Formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky observed that fundamental changes in cultural history occur not in direct line of descent from what has gone before, but rather as the knight moves in chess, in an abrupt lateral departure from the established track. In the academic field, the second half of the 20th century saw an expansion of what has become broadly called “visual cultural studies”: from art history, through film studies, then photography studies and most recently digital media. One effect of the technological innovations that prompted the last of these research areas has been to blur the boundaries between those that preceded it. A more profound effect of digital technologies, however, has been to challenge the primacy of medium implied in the appellation “digital media”. The materialist priorities enshrined in this last expression are in direct line of

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descent from the primacy allocated to the medium in modernist aesthetics, from Clement Greenberg to Rosalind E. Krauss, and a misrecognition of the knight's move effected by the essentially virtual nature of the image as a digital object in algorithmic culture.



Burgin's latest work, a collection of essays that span his career, was published this year by MACK.

TR What could you see as taking the place of the study of digital media?

VB We don't need to stop studying digital media, we just need to enlarge the specification of our

object. In the era of the technical object, Walter Benjamin saw the arrival of cinema as accompanied by a demand for the invention of the concepts that would be required in order to understand the new regimes of the image that cinema would bring. An analogous demand may be felt in our present era of digital objects in relation to the products of digital-image technologies, but whereas in Benjamin's day "cinema" named a circumscribed and relatively homogeneous institutional and aesthetic object, what we may provisionally call virtual-image practices now present a heterogeneous and boundless technological and phenomenological field. If an object of study is nevertheless to be discerned within this field it can only be through a radical revision of what constitutes an object. Yuk Hui's work contributes to this rethinking, but the lines of such a revision may also be found in other recent work in epistemology and philosophy of science. I'm thinking particularly of the work of Graham Harman and Tristan Garcia. Yuk Hui wrote a rather patronising and deprecating review of Garcia's 2010 book *Form and Object* and I don't foresee any forthcoming synthesis of their ideas, but there is much in Garcia's book that I found sympathetic. I emphasise the word "sympathetic". I am not a professional philosopher and am unqualified to take on the technical complexities of such work. The sympathy I feel towards some ideas in Garcia's book has little to do with the kinds of philosophically informed assessments that Yuk Hui brings to his review. It's more like the harmonic phenomenon of sympathetic vibration. Some time ago, in another written exchange, I tried to explain what it was I felt I was addressing in my visual work. I gave the example of the painter Pierre Bonnard saying that he wished the experience of his pictures to have something in common with the instantaneous experience of first entering an unfamiliar room – one sees everything at once, and yet nothing in particular. I said that what I wanted to add to Bonnard's purely optical picture is the fleeting concatenation of impromptu thoughts one may have at that moment, from purely personal associations to what I've elsewhere referred to as the "granular-perceptual" manifestation of the political – a mutable aspect of our everyday reality on an equal perceptual basis to the changing light, an aching knee, a distant sound or a regret. It was some time later that I read, in Tristan Garcia's introduction to *Form and Object*: "We live in this world of things, where a cutting of acacia, a gene, a computer-generated image, a transplantable hand, a musical sample, a trademarked name, or a sexual service are comparable things." It's on the basis of this kind of sympathetic resonance in a first encounter that I allow myself a rudimentary and opportunistic appropriation of two philosophical procedural tenets: a "flat ontology" – a non-hierarchical attitude to phenomenologically given things – and a definition of the "complex object" made of these things to include the intention of the observer, what the philosopher of science Anne-Françoise Schmid calls a "contemporary object", with the rider that for me this "intention" is not only a conscious intention. Schmid suggests that "we treat this object as a kind of unknown 'X' the properties of which are distributed in an unprecedented way between

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different disciplinary forms of knowledge. An object with multiple dimensions, each of which is a discipline.” So I could foresee the development of ways of studying the environment of digital media that take the virtual image as their primary object – an object to be described from different disciplinary viewpoints.

TR You say we need to develop new languages. To what extent is the language we have for discussing photography today adequate to describing its reality? You quote Rosalind E. Krauss that photography today “can only be viewed through the undeniable fact of its obsolescence”. If this is the case, what is photography’s future?

VB Photography’s future has been with us for some time. It did not arrive with the advent of digital cameras, it arrived with the broadband connection of these cameras to the internet. The underlying argument of my book, of course, is that what most people think of as “photography” is simply the industrial phase of the history of that technic that is the camera – the perspectival system of representation in all its material, and now immaterial, forms. From this point of view, the search for a language adequate to the description of the reality of photography today is the one I’ve identified as the project of virtual-image studies. What I call industrial photography is indeed obsolescent, but the mere fact of its technological obsolescence does not condemn it to disappearance – as argued by Simondon, technologies do not stand alone but are embedded within cultural practices, and these practices evolve. I began by saying how my turn to photography in the 1960s was motivated largely by my wish to develop an art practice that was in dialogue with the dominant representational forms of its time. To this end I turned to photography and drew on the languages of semiotics and psychoanalysis. It is this same wish to engage with the actually existing contemporary image-environment that has led me out of industrial photography – cameras of metal and glass – into working with virtual cameras in the computer-generated space of 3D modelling programmes. Alongside this “practical” work I’m trying to assemble the components of a language adequate to talking about the environment in which I find myself.

TR You’ve discussed how the digital has given birth to images with “no indexical relation to the material world in the form of scenes shot on immaterial cameras in ‘photorealistic’ virtual worlds”. Would the “dominant representational forms” you are in dialogue with now include such things as the vast virtual world-scapes of a computer game like *Assassin’s Creed* or the “mirror world” of Google Maps?

VB Yes, precisely. Such computer-generated parallel realities constitute a space of

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representations continuous with that of industrial photography in that it is perspectival, yet different from industrial image space in that it is navigable. In using game-engine software to make my work I get to experience this space “from the inside”. I move in a world that in terms of photorealism can resemble the real world, but in which the physics of material reality no longer apply. For example: I move a camera towards a wall and continue to move it until it passes through the wall. I then rotate the camera through 180 degrees to face the other side of the wall – and find that the wall is no longer there. The wall is a plane with only one face. It exists when approached from one direction, but not from the other. This real-world impossibility is a result of the routine practice of “back-face culling” by which the architects of game worlds reduce demands on computer hardware by not requiring calculations of things the gamer will never see. In play, the “collision” property of the plane is switched on: the player can never fall through the decor, my camera will always be deflected from the wall. As I say, this is banal to a game designer, but for me the ability to experience these worlds as they are “in themselves” helps me to think about them – literally imagine them – particularly in their relations to psychical reality. Our everyday experience of virtual spaces – strolling down memory lane in the prosthetic memory of YouTube, sauntering down the street where you live in Google Street View – increasingly resembles that of such psychical processes as spontaneous association and fantasy. Virtual worlds increasingly mediate our transactions between real space and psychical space, and progressively blur the distinction between one and the other. This not only inspires science-fiction scenarios but gives encouragement to futurists of all stripes, such as those transhumanists who see us advancing towards a disembodied future. In developing languages and concepts for understanding the regimes of the virtual image, we have to guard against losing sight of the baby in the bath water. In the words of the cartoonist Tom Gauld: “Reality is an illusion created entirely within the human mind, but it’s the only place you can get a decent cup of coffee.” ●