

## BOOK REVIEW

### Roland Barthes, Victor Burgin, No Comparison

John Muse

Ryan Bishop and Sunil Manghani, eds., *Barthes/Burgin: Research Notes for an Exhibition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

*B*arthes/Burgin, a catalog edited by the eponymous exhibition's curators, Ryan Bishop and Sunil Manghani, collages the theoretical and practical labors of Roland Barthes and Victor Burgin. Sixteen color plates represent drawings and paintings by Barthes; eight represent installation works by Burgin: *A Place to Read* (2010), *Prairie* (2015), and *Belledonne* (2016); four represent Burgin's *Parzival* (2013). An essay by Bishop and Manghani entitled 'Barthes, Burgin, *Barre Oblique*' opens the catalog, then come the works by Barthes and the dialogues with Burgin on Barthes and Burgin on his installations. The catalog concludes with Burgin's description of *Belledonne*, which, as he writes,

takes its point of departure from a postcard from St-Hilaire-du-Touvet in southeast France, where from 1942-5 Barthes was a patient in a tuberculosis sanatorium. The postcard shows a panoramic lookout point with a view of the Belledonne mountain range in the French Alps.<sup>1</sup>

We move from Barthes to Burgin back to Barthes, all with Barthes in view, even the view *from* Barthes, from St-Hilaire-du-Touvet. What of the catalog itself though? First, a gray cover, Roland Barthes' gray – though it is rightly branded otherwise, i.e., Pale Gray, a Colorplan color<sup>2</sup> – the gray of the Neutral, a color that refers us to the neutralization of white and black, light and dark, color and nothing-at-all; not the *color* gray, which would be one among others, something you could buy, apply, spill, etc., but gray as the sign of utopia.<sup>3</sup> Second and third, a title and a subtitle: on the one hand,

*Barthes/Burgin*, and on the other, *Research Notes for an Exhibition*. The title cites *S/Z*, Barthes' analysis of the codes that structure Honoré de Balzac's 1830 novella *Sarrasine* – and the very labor of the coupling slash, the *barre oblique*. The subtitle cites yet another subtitle, that of Barthes' *La Chambre claire: note sur la photographie* and thus what he elsewhere calls his 'taste for division', his taste for bits, pieces, fragments, and scraps, the subtle but sharp flavor of the mere note.<sup>4</sup>

Altogether then the catalog's points of departure, cover, and paratextual elements deliver home-field advantage to Roland Barthes and his operators: the gray, the *barre oblique*, the fragment. But what then of Victor Burgin? During 'Reading Barthes', a conversation with Manghani, Burgin opens a questioning parenthesis:

This may be the moment to remind whoever may be reading our exchange that although the exhibition you conceived of has opened in 2016 it was originally planned to open the previous year, to mark the centenary of Barthes' birth. Your juxtaposition of my own work with that of Barthes is an act of collage I have accepted as your creation of 'an object to think with' – otherwise, as the English expression goes, 'there's no comparison'. But to enter into the game again...<sup>5</sup>

Burgin here treats Manghani and Bishop as artists: they have, as he says, *collaged* – from *coller*, to glue – some of his and Barthes' works in order to celebrate Barthes, recirculate this name with his own, and create an object to think with. 'Collage' then is Victor Burgin's name for the *barre oblique*, the slash that articulates the relation between these two proper names. What does collage then make of the exhibition? And what else can Burgin make of collage?

Bishop and Burgin in their conversation 'Still Moving' discuss the formal structure of Burgin's exhibited projection works (they loop seamlessly) and their sensitivity to the space of exhibition (sited in gallery spaces, they neither begin nor end). And then the conversation turns to what Burgin calls 'the challenge for the writing'<sup>6</sup> posed by the loop and the situation. Burgin first relates making his works to the exploring of a house, following an analogy offered by writer Alice Munro, who speaks metaphorically of the dark room at the center of all her stories; 'dark in the sense of being obscured from direct knowledge', says Burgin.<sup>7</sup> Then, guided

by this obscurity, Burgin relates an ‘analogy... taken from the story of *The Invisible Man*’. ‘The early film version...’, Bishop asks. ‘Yes’, Burgin replies:

There’s one scene in the film where [the invisible man is] running from the police and by implication is totally naked, but he crosses a snow-covered field and you see his footprints in the snow. But the scene I prefer as analogy is the one where he’s in the street, and there’s a lot of detritus, old newspapers and stuff, and suddenly a wind blows up and all this stuff starts sticking to him and he’s suddenly there, you see him. But of course you don’t: you never see the invisible man, you only see the stuff that sticks to him, which can be anything. And that’s the way I feel it is for me when I work – and probably the way it is for anybody else – I feel there’s some *je ne sais quoi*, Munro’s ‘indescribable feeling’, the ‘dark room’ at the centre, that you can never see, that you can only kind of stick things around and hope that some sense of its shape will emerge. But what results from that process of collage, or graffiti, is never right; it will always disappoint, and the disappointment in what you’ve done makes you want to try again.<sup>8</sup>

Around Munro’s dark room, around the invisible man, Burgin’s writing spirals, driven by and equally protective of the *je ne sais quoi*, pasting stuff around an invisible but vulnerable core, a core with its own deadly agency.<sup>9</sup> Later in the conversation, prompted by Bishop to talk about the ‘imaginary space of hybrid materials that we encounter through a heterogeneous variety of fragments’, Burgin says, ‘if we were to stay with the analogy of the “invisible man” then we would say among the things that stick are fragments of remembered films...’<sup>10</sup> He writes with these fragments, not to have us fix on them, but to turn us toward what they turn around, the *je ne sais quoi* and the very limits of knowledge: the fragments would be vivid, but to take them for what they are would be to miss the enigmatic force of the gap they both reveal and conceal.

And crucially as Burgin says above, *The Invisible Man* is one such remembered film, which, as armature for an analogy, is itself a vivid instance of the failure of the vivid to do more than hint and distract. These fragments too are imperfect, referring as poorly to their origins as to the shape they seek to clarify. Bishop, prompted by Burgin, offers an anchor: ‘the early film version’, i.e., the 1933 film directed by James Whale.<sup>11</sup> The scene of the

footsteps in the snow appears close to this film's end, though the invisible man is running *towards* and not away from the police. First hint. And the scene where '... suddenly a wind blows up and all this stuff starts sticking to him...' does not occur in this film at all but does occur to Burgin, prompting him to throw it up and around this otherwise imperceptible core. Second hint. Munro's room isn't dark, or isn't only dark. She calls it 'the black room at the center of the house...' Black is more of a substance than a quality of light, thick with color, weight, and history.<sup>12</sup> Third hint. The film, Munro's remembered story – these analogies, as likenesses, show that they can not show it all or say it all, and are standing in for what otherwise can't be exhibited. Burgin's remarks thus *do* what they say; he sticks these things around, these fragments from remembered films and essays, to the very idea of sticking-things-around. The question, 'how to write?' brings collage back into the conversation and itself requires collage. Only collage can give us some sense of the shape of collage. But as Burgin also says, collage 'is never quite right; it will always disappoint'. Not failure, but disappointment, which is the response of the one who has been here before and will be here again, of the one who, trying again, says that among the things that stick to the invisible man are fragments of the invisible man. Thus opens an abyss.

Now, let us link collage to the project of the exhibition catalog. First, collage in this expanded sense does not simply juxtapose self-sufficient wholes, persons, and works, does not offer a new vision of a new totality; rather, collage holds and probes something unknown with things unknown because remembered and partial. Burgin infuses his work and the exhibition with the thought of such collage; as he says to Manghani, 'Your juxtaposition of my own work with that of Barthes is an act of collage'. When he describes Munro's dark room, he not only describes the material conditions of his own video installations, which require, as their basis, dark rooms, rooms that disappear as places so that other things and other places – Istanbul, Chicago, St-Hilaire-du-Touvet – may appear, if partially – he also allegorizes *Barthes/Burgin*, the exhibition. When he describes the invisible man – rather when he describes not being able to describe or even track the invisible man except through footsteps and detritus, fragments of remembered films – including this one, *The Invisible Man* – he allegorizes *Barthes/Burgin*. The exhibition is a collage; he and Barthes, their works, will have thusly been remembered, celebrated even, but Burgin asks us to attend to both the *je ne sais quoi* and to the hints and distortions that hold it

together, a self-referential knot that disappoints and compels as it disappoints.

Second, this collage – Manghani’s and Bishop’s, Burgin’s and Barthes’ – is to be an object to think with – otherwise, as Burgin says, there’s no comparison. Neither an object to think *about* nor an object to play *with*, collage is an object that thinks with and alongside those who handle it. Collage is an object to think with and not an instrument: Burgin cannot describe it without letting it use him, fragment him and his memories. Burgin, in handling *Barthes/Burgin* and his place in it, turns it into the collage that he already is, and when he thinks with it to metaphorize his process, collage makes that process both vivid and dark, more enigmatic; collage is not something that one controls so much as the only thing going on. Collage becomes ontological and the exhibition and catalog its allegory.

Third and finally, the challenge for the writing is the challenge for the curating is the challenge for the reading; as Burgin says, it’s the way it is for him and the ‘way it is for anybody else.’ You glue things together, stick things around – drawings, paintings, video installations, interviews, critical essays – and attend to what emerges. But according to Burgin’s self-referential bind, the *je ne sais quoi* of the exhibition is collage itself, which can only be discovered and covered by collage. I here pose collage then as what Bishop and Manghani will call ‘a new mode of critical consideration’, which, as an object to think with, helps their artwork, the exhibition, pass Burgin’s test and helps the reader make something of the catalog:

An important tenet of the exhibition has been to consider Burgin and Barthes as being both artists and writers. Victor Burgin has long been recognised as both theorist and practitioner, while Barthes is known as a theorist and writer. In bringing to the fore Barthes’ own sustained practice of painting and drawing (maintained throughout the 1970s), the book seeks to prompt a new critical consideration of Barthes/Burgin, theory/practice, writing/making and criticality/visuality.<sup>13</sup>

Bishop and Manghani begin – and we end – with a crisis of vocations and a crisis of couplings. Suddenly the wind blows. Remembered things, vivid and seemingly whole, are nonetheless partial and adrift: Barthes, Burgin, theory, practice, writing, making, criticality, visibility, and thus the slash too. These names, activities, distinctions, and abstractions are both hints and

distractions; they stick to but obscure the collage that founds them. Bishop and Manghani rightly allow Burgin to frame their catalog and exhibition as a work of collage and this collage as a critique of collage, a critique of mere comparison, of both... and..., a critique of exhibition as show-and-tell, but critique too as care for the invisible, for what remains obscure and can be neither shown nor told but only followed and obscured, for the disappointing but ineluctable compulsion to shape what promises to give shape to making and thinking.

So, let us add this object to think with to the list of Barthesian operators employed by Bishop, Manghani, and the catalog's designers: the grey, the *barre oblique*, the fragment – and now collage. Collage supplements the *barre oblique*, what the curators call “visual onomatopoeia” for the act of mark-making generally,<sup>14</sup> adding to the latter the invisible, nameless, silent things that attract both mark-making and exhibition-making, both graffiti and collage. *Barthes/Burgin* invites us to treat assemblies of all kinds and all scales – persons, exhibitions, catalogs, reviews – as collages, as vivid metonymies swarming around dark but alluring enigmas and to treat these enigmas as both the cause and the effect of such swarming. Roland Barthes, writer and theorist and artist, is to have been none of these things; these vocations, broken and mixed as they are, make up the collage that sustains and covers his name, that disappoints and compels efforts to celebrate it. Collage then, as Bishop and Manghani, following Burgin, demonstrate, compares but must also look elsewhere than comparison, into the darkness and with the wind; otherwise, there is no comparison.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan Bishop and Sunil Manghani, eds., *Barthes/Burgin: Research Notes for an Exhibition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 123.

<sup>2</sup> Katie Evans, a member of the catalog design team at the Studio 3015, Winchester School of Art, kindly informed me via email of the cover stock color choice. See Colorplan, '50 colors', swatch library,

<http://colorplanpapers.com/50colours> [Accessed 9 July 2016]. E-mail from Katie Evans, 16 June 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Barthes on buying and spilling a paint called Neutral: 'Well, I was both punished and disappointed: punished because Neutral spatters and stains (it's a type of dull gray-black); disappointed because Neutral is a color like the others, and for sale...: the unclassified is classified...'. See *Barthes/Burgin*, p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> 'le gout de la division: fragments, miniatures, partitions, glittering details..., a bird's-eye view of fields, windows, haiku, line drawing, script, photography, in plays the 'scene' à l'italienne, in short, depending on your point of view, all the articulation of the semanticist or all the raw material of the fetishist'. See Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), p. 70.

<sup>5</sup> Bishop and Manghani, *Barthes/Burgin*, p. 81.

<sup>6</sup> Bishop and Manghani, *Barthes/Burgin*, p. 102.

<sup>7</sup> Bishop and Manghani, *Barthes/Burgin*, p. 103.

<sup>8</sup> Bishop and Manghani, *Barthes/Burgin*, p. 103: '... or graffiti' would support other analogies, ones that might more closely align with Barthes' writings on writing and drawing. Here though collage covers and more vividly captures the sense of 'sticking things around'.

<sup>9</sup> 'Deadly' lest we forget that the invisible man is a maniacal killer, and that death, following finitude's score, is the absolute master, unapproachable, ineluctable, and so a strong candidate for the unknown.

<sup>10</sup> Bishop and Manghani, *Barthes/Burgin*, p. 104.

<sup>11</sup> *The Invisible Man*, dir. by James Whale (Universal Pictures, 1933).

<sup>12</sup> With the word 'weight' I want to mark the racial difference harbored in Burgin's two examples, which is most easily sensed when *The Invisible Man* is also brought back to Ralph Ellison's novel of the same name. Alice Munro, 'What is Real?', in

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*Making it New: Contemporary Canadian Stories*, ed. by John Metcalf (Auckland: Methuen, 1982), p. 226.

<sup>13</sup> Bishop and Manghani, *Barthes/Burgin*, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Bishop and Manghani, *Barthes/Burgin*, p. 21.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Muse is a Visual Media Scholar at Haverford College. A portfolio of his artworks and curatorial projects can be found at [finleymuse.com](http://finleymuse.com), his scholarly works at [haverford.academia.edu/JohnMuse/](http://haverford.academia.edu/JohnMuse/)

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